MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #30

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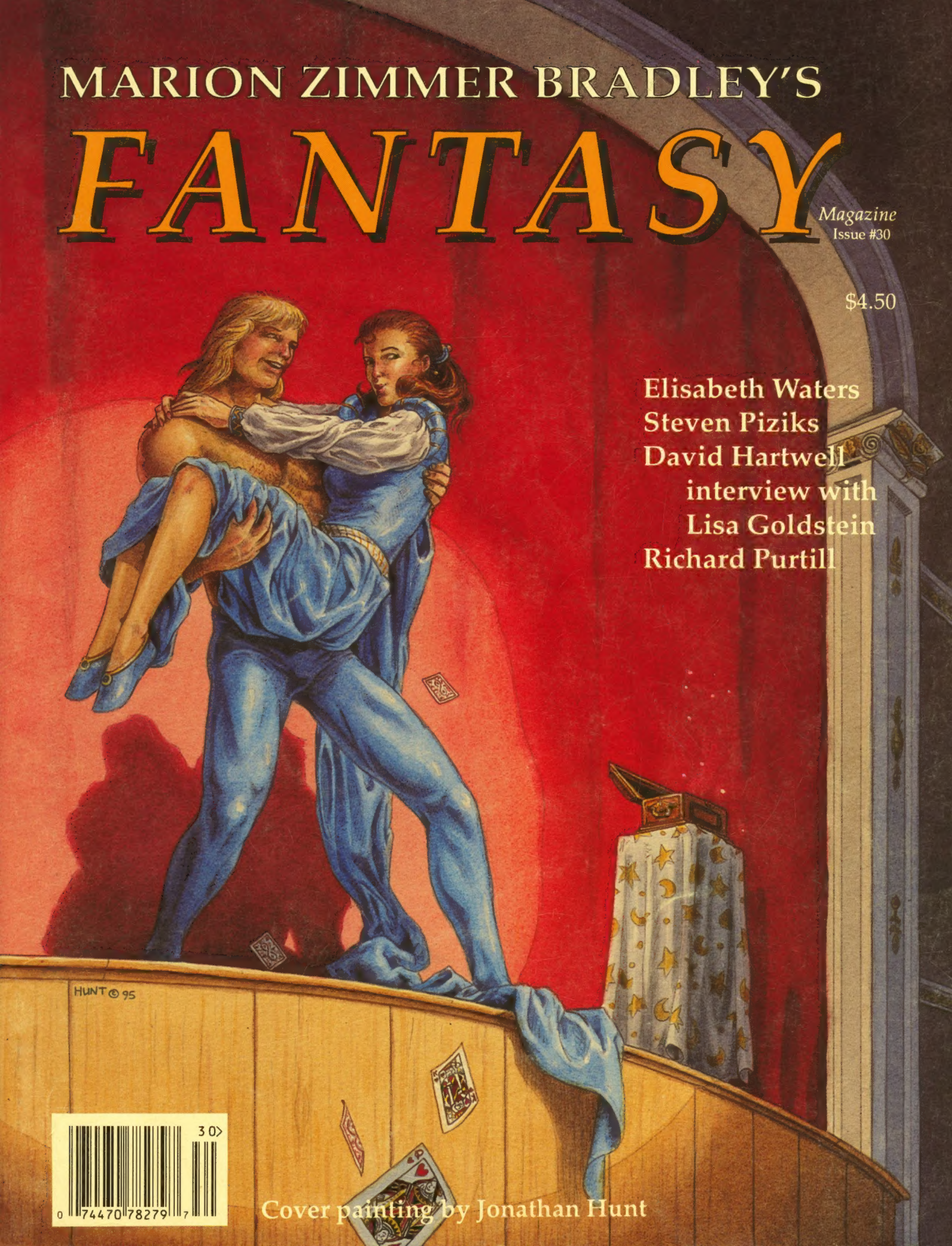
Steven Piziks
David Hartwell
interview with
Lisa Goldstein
Richard Purtill



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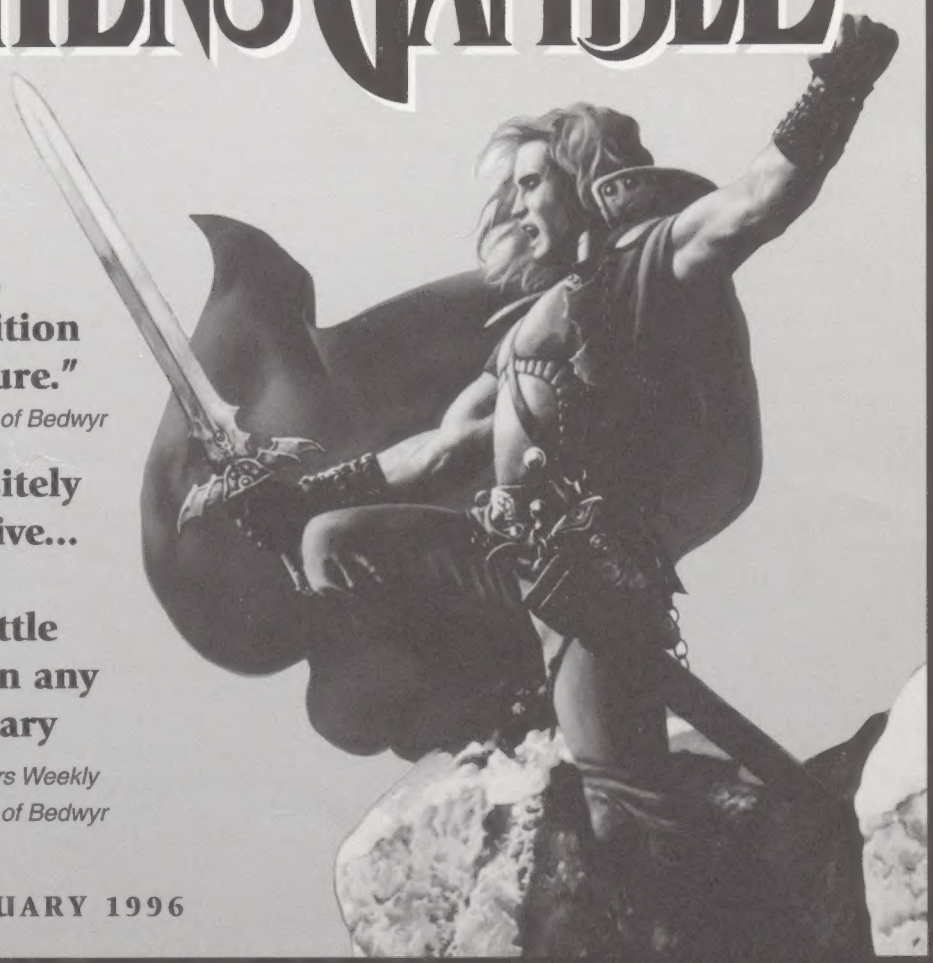

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

EDITORIAL

From some of the submissions I receive, I get the feeling that some people have forgotten what a *story* is. I get some beautiful manuscripts that fall more in the category of "mood pieces", and are not really suited to a commercial magazine — although I'm sure that a college literary magazine would love them. What is a story? The detailed answer is in my column elsewhere in this issue. For me, it consists of an interesting character who wants something, overcomes various obstacles, and either does or does not get what he wants — preferably with a good deal of interesting detail along the way.

But for me it is also important that the reader should care whether or not the character gets what he wants. At thirteen, I began to write a book about Charles Edward Stuart — "Bonnie Prince Charlie" — which had all kinds of interesting detail: colorful clans, tragic battles, gallant chieftains. But when I had the book about half finished, I discovered that I didn't much like the prince, who ended up a disgraceful old drunk and peddled the crown of Scotland all over the map to anyone who would fight to get it for him. And so I never wrote **THE LAST OF THE STUARTS**, because I felt that if I didn't care for my main character, the readers wouldn't like him either.

I made that mistake in **TWO TO CONQUER**. If even I didn't care to spend much time in the company of my protagonist, how could the rest of you be expected to? That was my least successful Darkover book, and I'm sure there was a connection.

In my column in issue 25, I was discussing how to catch an editor's attention with original ideas and settings and — in a throwaway line — said, "If dryads are over-done, think up a new subject that isn't. Cows, for instance; it's a wide-open field." You may be able to guess what happened next. We were inundated with submissions of cow stories. Perhaps "inundated" is an exaggeration, but it was certainly well over a dozen.

Some of them were simply generic stories with cow window-dressing, but the better ones demonstrated that if you develop a plot around an under-used motif like a cow, you almost can't help but produce an original story. Originality alone will not sell the story, but it certainly helps you catch the editor's attention.

The best of the cow stories that we received is published in this issue. We all found it delightful and humorous. But the rest of you should take notice that cows are no longer an under-used motif in our slush pile. They're almost getting downright trite. So if you want to catch my eye with an original storyline, you'll have to use some other topic. You don't have to wait for me to suggest one — that's what your imagination is for!

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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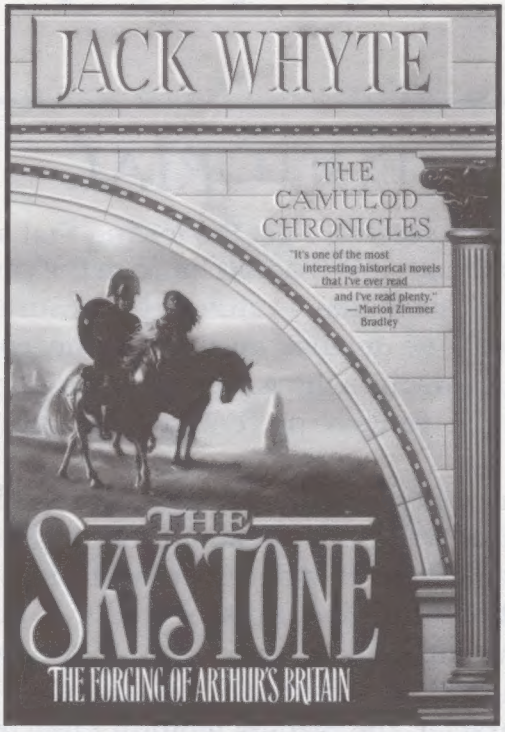
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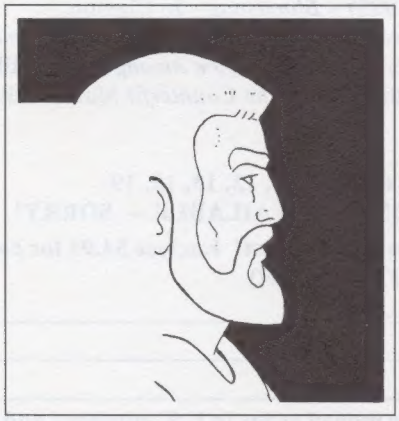

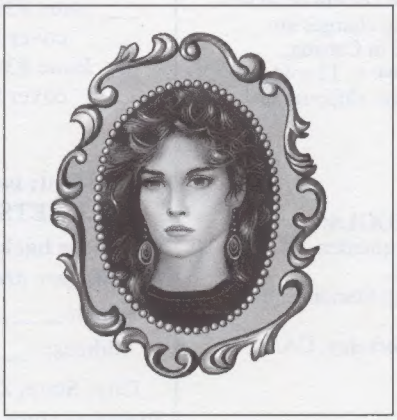

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A Prince Among Frogs

by Elisabeth Waters

Jan looked into her refrigerator and frowned. "Out of diet soda again," she muttered. "When am I ever going to learn to shop properly?" She closed the refrigerator door and went outside to her back patio.

She decided to go next door to her cousin Julian's house. Julian was sixteen years old and a neatness freak. Over the past year, with the help of his decidedly unusual cleaning service, his home had gone from total chaos (courtesy of his absentminded parents) to a place that could be depended on to have whatever Jan had just run out of. And she knew Julian was home; she could hear him talking to a friend on his patio.

She walked through the gate between their back yards, calling out a greeting to Julian and his friend, just as the sun set.

Since both of them were looking at her, she was the only one who saw exactly what happened next, and even she didn't believe it at first.

There was a flash of bright light, outshining the floodlights which lit the terrace, and a loud popping sound from an aquarium which had been sitting on the terrace next to Julian's friend. When she had opened the gate, the aquarium had contained a frog. Now it was on its side and a naked man was sitting beside it. He looked to be about Jan's age (mid-twenties), and the first thing she noticed as she stared at him was that he was gorgeous. His eyes were brilliant blue, his hair was blond and shoulder-length, and his muscles... His pecs looked like something off the cover of a romance novel, but he had the leg muscles of a figure skater. *Of course,* a tiny voice in her mind said, *if he really* was *just a frog, he* would *have great legs.*

He also looked disoriented by his surroundings and very embarrassed by his nudity, especially when he noticed Jan staring at him. He blushed and moved quickly to stand behind the nearest chair. Since the chair was wrought-iron filigree, it wasn't much cover, but Jan supposed it was the thought that counted. She felt a bit embarrassed herself — it wasn't like her to drool over a man's muscles.

The boys' conversation stopped dead as they twisted in their chairs and saw what Jan was looking at. Julian, his jaw hanging, just stared at the man for a second. Then he found his voice. "Aiken!" he screamed.

The door to the kitchen opened and shut again. "What's wrong, Julian?" a gruff low-pitched voice asked.

"He, uh —" Julian pointed to the naked man.

The man, still clutching the back of the chair, twisted to face the door and inclined his head gravely, looking relieved at the sight of the small brown man.

Stranger and stranger, Jan thought. *He can see Aiken, and he's not freaking out — which is how most people react to him.*

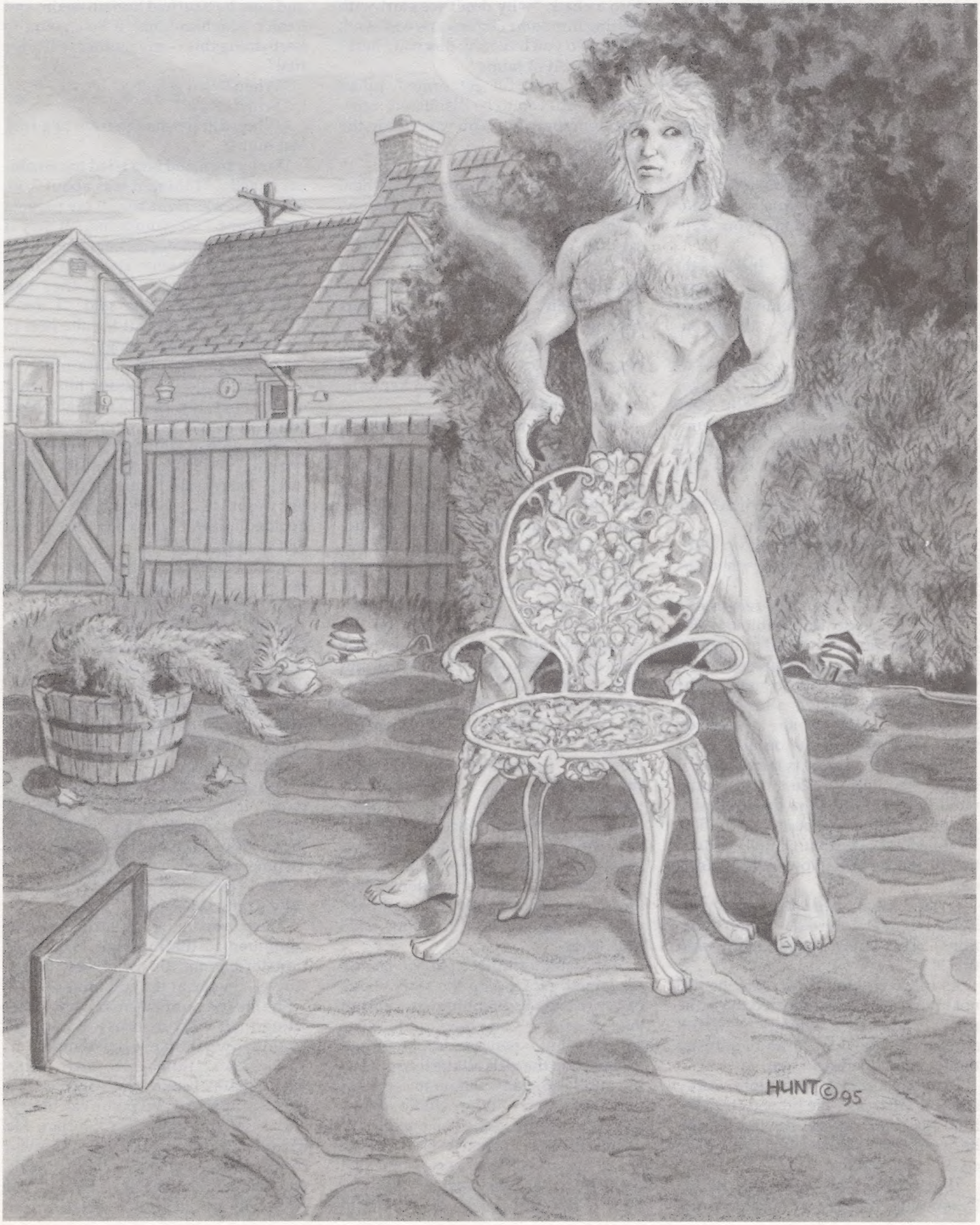
"Good evening, gentlebeing," the man said. "Peace be to the house thou keepest."

"I thank thee, Highness," Aiken replied. "Master Julian," he continued, "I am a brownie. I do floors, I do walls, I do windows, I even do ceilings. I do not, however, do enchanted princes, enchanted frogs, or any combination thereof. You'll have to get help for this little problem elsewhere." The kitchen door closed behind him with a definite snap.

"An enchanted prince?" Julian asked incredulously.

"You have a brownie for a housekeeper?" his friend said in disbelief. "I thought brownies existed only in fairy tales — except for the chocolate kind."

"What's wrong with having a brownie?" the prince asked



Artwork by Jonathan Hunt

curiously. "I'm sure he's an excellent housekeeper. And, to be frank, I consider his suggestion that we seek further help an excellent one."

Julian looked helpless. "Jan? Have you got any ideas?"

"Jan?" the prince asked, turning to look at her.

"This is my cousin Jan," Julian explained. "She'll know what to do; she's a witch."

"A witch," his friend repeated. "Your housekeeper is a brownie, and your cousin is a witch. I suppose your aunt is the tooth fairy?"

"Not that I know of," Julian said calmly. "And who are you to talk, Danny?" he added, somewhat less calmly. "You're the one with the enchanted frog prince!"

"He's not my prince — or frog — or whatever," Danny protested. "I never even saw him before last night! Thea brought him to my little sister's slumber party and persuaded Jennifer to kiss him, and then — " he broke off, shaking his head.

"Is thy cousin a powerful witch?" the prince asked Julian hopefully.

Julian nodded. "She called up a tornado for her very first spell when she was only eleven."

"Impressive," the prince remarked.

"Maybe," Danny said dubiously. He seemed the most unnerved of them by the whole business. Jan guessed that it was his first exposure to magic. She and Julian had become a bit blasé on the subject. "What was she *trying* to do when she called up the tornado?"

Jan laughed. "I was trying to make it rain so that my brother Peter and I wouldn't have to weed the vegetable garden. I've learned better since then. I'll do what I can, Julian, but I'm due at the theater tonight. Now, what's going on?"

"Well," Julian, belatedly remembering his manners, started with introductions. "This is my friend Danny, and this is —"

As Julian groped for a name he did not know, something seemed to jog the prince's memory. Suddenly he looked a good deal less dazed and confused than he had a moment ago.

"Prince Florian of Astrefiore, at thy service, Mistress." He bowed from behind his chair. Jan got the impression he would have kissed her hand if he could have reached it.

"But when I brought him here," Danny said, pointing to the aquarium, "he was a frog."

"Well," Jan said calmly, dropping into a chair, "why don't we start with getting him some clothes to wear? And, Julian, do you have any diet soda here? I've run out at home."

"Yeah, sure; I'll get some." Julian looked relieved to be dismissed, however temporarily. "You want ice in the soda?"

"Please."

Julian disappeared into the kitchen, and Jan looked at Florian and Danny. "Why don't you sit down," she suggested, "and tell me what happened?"

Danny sat down again, but Florian clearly did not wish to leave the shelter of the chair. He did, however, start talking.

"There was a beautiful young princess named Rowena," he began, "who was abducted by a dragon on her fourteenth birthday."

Danny made a sudden choking noise; Jan glared him into silence.

"My eldest brother was among the guests at the party when she was carried off," Florian continued, "and he came home and told us of her abduction — and of how her own father forbade all the princes gathered there to attempt her rescue!" He obviously still felt indignant at such injustice and at the king's lack of feeling for his daughter's plight. "As it is the clear duty of a prince to rescue such an innocent victim, and as King Mark's unnatural command was not binding on *me*, I set out for the mountain where the dragon laired." He stopped and frowned. "I remember the journey to the mountain, and I remember approaching the dragon's cave and hearing the most frightful shrieking noise... and the next thing I remember was being in a most strange room with a very soft floor, full of maidens I had never seen before, dressed in odd apparel —" he broke off, eyeing Jan's blue jeans.

"My sister's slumber party," Danny explained, picking up the story. "One of her friends brought him as a sort of joke present — you know, for Jennifer to kiss — but when she did, he turned human, and the girls all started screaming and I came downstairs to see what was happening — I thought he was on drugs, 'cause he looked so spaced out — and then he turned back to a frog again, and my parents came home just then, so I took him upstairs and put him in my old aquarium. I thought maybe I dreamed the whole thing, but I brought him here tonight just in case, and now he's turned human again, and I can't take him home if he's going to keep doing this — my mother will have fits!"

"When?" Jan asked.

"When what?"

"When did he change back to a frog last night?

Danny frowned and tried to remember exactly, "I think it was about 7:30, because it was right before my parents came home." He shuddered. "If they'd come in two minutes earlier, they would have seen him change, and I don't think they'd have liked it. But if they had seen him change," he said, "I don't think Dad would want to take him to school. He teaches biology."

"Seven thirty," Jan murmured. "I assume that nobody kissed him again or did anything else that might have triggered a change?"

"Not unless you count screaming, running, and hiding behind the furniture," Danny said. "I started to call 911, but when Thea said he'd been a frog, I decided I didn't want to try to explain *that* to the police."

Jan leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and tried to concentrate. She had a guilty feeling that part of this was her fault. She was a stage magician, in addition to being a witch, and she had been trying for days to come up with a really good original illusion. Prince Florian's appearance in her life looked like a definite example of "Be careful what you pray for; you will certainly get it."

"Magical transformations," she muttered. "It's not the standard frog prince spell, or a virgin's kiss would have turned him human permanently — I assume your sister is a virgin."

"She'd better be," Danny said grimly. "She's only thirteen."

"Vampires don't turn into frogs," Jan continued to think aloud, "and their transformations are voluntary. Werewolves change at the full moon —"

She looked up at the moon, low in the western sky. "The moon is waxing now. I wonder what time it sets tonight."

Aiken and Julian returned, Julian with a glass of soda, and Aiken with a book, a clipboard and pen, a calculator, and a set of clothes for Florian. He dumped everything but the clothing in front of Jan, then took Florian aside and helped him to dress — Florian had obviously never seen a sweatshirt or

Artwork by Jonathan Hunt

sweatpants before and seemed unclear on the concept of underwear. Jan tried not to watch — at least not obviously — and managed to keep from giggling when Florian got tangled in the sweatshirt. Aiken looked as if he wanted to swear, but was restraining himself out of respect for the Prince's rank.

Julian seemed happy to let Aiken handle this problem. He set the soda on the table in front of Jan and flopped into the remaining chair. "How's it going?"

"I'm thinking," Jan said, pausing to sip her soda. She looked at the book Aiken had dropped in front of her. It was an almanac, and when she opened it, the pages turned to an explanation of how to calculate moonrise and moonset. Jan grabbed the clipboard and calculator and started figuring. It took about five minutes before she had her answer. The moon had set last night at 7:32 P.M. local time. "I think it's some sort of crazy cross between the frog prince spell and lycanthropy. If it's a sundown moon-up transformation, which is my best guess at the moment, he'll turn back to a frog about an hour later tonight than he did last night. We'll need to observe him for a while and find out exactly what time he turns back into a frog."

"Is there no way to stop that from happening, Mistress?" Prince Florian asked, poking his head out of the sweatshirt. "Before I was not aware when I was a frog, but now I am, and I do not enjoy it."

"Not in the next two hours, which is all the time I have now," Jan said briskly. "I've got to be at the theater in time to get ready for my act."

"Thou art an *actress*?" The prince looked scandalized. Obviously where he came from, actress ranked well below witch on the social scale. "Surely a witch does not need to earn her bread displaying herself on the stage like some common harlot."

"No, I'm a stage magician. Don't look so shocked, Prince Florian. I enjoy it, and it pays the bills. You do realize, don't you," she gestured at the house and yard, "that you're not in your own world anymore? We may have a few princess left, but dragons exist only in story tales. And women on the stage," she looked him straight in the eye, "are *not* harlots."

Florian looked around him. "This is indeed a strange world." He looked dismayed. "What can I do here?"

"Maybe you could put him in your act," Danny suggested hopefully. "If you can predict exactly when he's going to change, you can work up a Frog Prince routine, can't you?"

Artwork by Jonathan Hunt

Be careful what you pray for... Jan thought. *Well, at least it was a quick response.*

She chewed on her lower lip and looked upward, calculating furiously. "Let's see: if I'm right about the spell, at moondark he'd be a frog almost all night; at full moon he'd be human most of the night. The waning moon rises after sunset and doesn't set until after sunrise, so he'd turn human well after dark and frog at dawn, and the waxing moon rises before sunset and sets before dawn, so he'd turn human at sunset. There's too much variation in moonrise, but with Daylight Savings Time I can do the dinner show and use sunset. That changes only about a minute per night. So if I time the act carefully, it should work for at least part of the month. That's not a bad idea, Danny. I take it you weren't planning to keep him as a pet."

"No," Danny said. "My father was planning to take him to school for next week's biology lab."

"That would be a problem," Jan acknowledged. She turned to Florian. "Did you understand what I was saying? Until I can come up with a counterspell and return you to your own world — neither of which is likely to happen soon, I'm afraid — you are going to be a frog all day and part of most nights. You can live with me —"

"You can have my aquarium," Danny offered.

"Thank you, Danny. You can live in it during the day, Prince Florian, and I'll make sure you have food and water. I live next door, so Julian and Danny can visit you. On nights when the change is at the proper time, you can work in my magic act with me. And I'll keep trying to find a way to free you from the spell and send you back to your own world. Do we have a deal?"

Florian looked at the moon, which was moving steadily toward the horizon.

"Agreed," he said.

Over the next several weeks, Jan studied Florian and the spell he was under. It seemed to be layered: the first layer had turned him into a frog permanently, then, presumably by means of a virgin's kiss, he had gone to the second layer, where he was human part of the time, was able to recover most of his previous human memories, and retained consciousness even when he was in frog form. (He was also becoming addicted to television.) Jan suspected that the spell had at least one, and maybe two, additional layers, but she didn't know what they were or how to trigger them.

While Jan studied Florian, Florian studied her world, beginning with television. Jan made him start watching *Sesame Street* when she discovered he couldn't read. She sat with him when she could, explaining what was fact, what was sitcom, and what was advertising; and she told the boys to do likewise when they were with him. (She found out later that they were renting videos for him while she was out during the day, and was thankful that they were too young to rent anything X-rated.)

Florian liked some of the educational programming, particularly *Mathnet* — changing the channel when that was on brought loud croaks of protest, but mostly he liked CNN or the sports chan-

nel, although he found *Star Trek* (in any form) fascinating. He also developed a taste for opera after stumbling across a performance of *Turandot* one night while channel surfing in human form.

Aiken had produced a wardrobe for him (Jan didn't ask how or where), so toward the end of the month, when he was human late at night, Jan started taking him out with her. They went to a couple of latenight movies and did a lot of driving around to get Florian used to the city environment. To Jan's surprise, he seemed to like it. She found it strange that he could adapt so quickly to such an alien environment.

They also worked out the details of the act, beginning with a costume: a pair of tights of very stretchy material. Aiken provided them, too, which was a good thing, because Jan had no idea where else she could get something that would stretch from frog to human size. Fortunately Prince Florian wasn't very tall, even though his legs were well-muscled. After he'd worn them through a few transformations, Jan got over her initial fear that they'd split right off him, getting them both arrested for indecency. As soon as he changed to human, he added a cloak to the outfit, which made him look much more dressed. Of course, he still looked very sexy.

"The women in the audience are going to love this," Jan said. It was nearing moondark, which meant they were working during the hours just before dawn. "Now are you sure you remember the patter?"

"Mistress Jan," Florian said patiently, "in my own world I had some slight degree of fame as a minstrel. And where I come from, we are expected to *remember* things, not look them up in a book." He looked pointedly at the almanac Jan was studying as she sat on the floor, surrounded by several reference books, a calculator, a pen, and a lot of paper.

"It is very important that we get sunset and moonrise and moonset times correct," Jan said. "That's the key to our act. Actually, timing is vital in most magic."

"I understand that," Florian said. "The boys brought some videotapes for me to watch. I trust thou dost not plan to saw me in half."

"No," Jan said. "I'm not very fond of that trick. I saw a show in Las Vegas once where they must have done at least three variations of the 'saw-the-woman-in-half' trick. There were only about three good illusions, which is *not* enough to carry a two-hour show. I have rarely been so bored in my life. That's one of the reasons I keep my act short."

Florian sighed. "I am glad my father is not here to see this. He would not approve at all."

Jan looked up at Florian. He was sprawled in an armchair, wearing only his tights. They were bright blue and matched his eyes, but she doubted that his father would appreciate the effect. "I'm sure you're correct," she said, "and I'm glad he's not here too."

Florian smiled suddenly at her. It was a smile to make a woman's knees quiver. *What is his world like that he had to take on a dragon to find a woman?* Jan wondered. *Even though he was a surplus prince, there should have been some girl who would want him.*

"I think my father would like thee," he said.

"Really?" Jan raised her eyebrows. "As much as Princess Rowena?"

"Better than Princess Rowena," Florian said. "Thou hast a good heart and a strong sense of honor. That is more important than being the daughter of a king."

"What is she like?" Jan asked. This was the first time the subject had come up since the night she met Florian. "Is she very beautiful?"

"Princesses with large dowries are beautiful by definition," Florian said with a slight tinge of cynicism in his tone. "In fact, I did not see much of her, and what I did see — " He smiled. "I am quite content not to have married her, even if being a frog is part of the price of escaping that fate." He smiled again at Jan. "Thou dost outshine her in beauty as the sun does the moon."

"Uh, thanks," Jan said, suddenly feeling awkward. "You're pretty good-looking too." She bent her head over the almanac again. "Now if the moon sets at 18:56 at forty degrees north latitude at the Greenwich Meridian, it will set at —" She put the calculator on top of the almanac and punched numbers into it with her left hand while making notes on a pad of paper with her right. "— 20:30 local time here. That gives us plenty of time to do the act. We can start next week."

"Canst thou not tell with thy true magic when the transformation is about to take place?" asked Florian. "I can feel when it is to happen."

Now that he mentioned it, Jan realized that she could tell. "You're right," she said. "You look sort of fuzzy for a few seconds right before it happens. That's how I know when to kiss you so that it looks as if my kiss is turning you human. But it's only a few seconds' warning, and I have to be watching for it. That's why all the calculations are necessary. I *really* don't want anything to go wrong with this on stage."

"Nothing will," Florian reassured her. "Thou hast calculated the times for the next two months, thy costume is done and looks wonderful, and I know exactly what I'm to do for the tricks after I turn human when I act as thy assistant. We are going to do well, believe me."

Florian was correct. The new act was a smash hit, and the audience for the dinner show increased dramatically over the next two weeks. But as the full moon approached, when moonrise would come after sunset, Jan told the manager that she would not be able to perform for a couple of weeks. He protested vigorously, and she agreed to one more show, on the night of the full moon, before taking a break. Given this concession, he readily agreed to schedule her an hour later than usual. Jan spent most of the day pacing about the house, checking and double-checking the local time for moonrise, and talking anxiously to a frog whose side of the conversation was limited, to say the least.

The house was packed, and Jan was a nervous wreck. She ran her hands over the skirt of her long blue dress, which was a perfect match for Florian's tights and cape, redid her hair twice, double-checked her makeup, and triple-checked her props.

"I still have a bad feeling about this," she told Florian as she carried his box to the stage. "I keep thinking that I forgot something important."

Once she started the familiar tricks that began her act, she found herself relaxing. The first part of the act was simple sleight-of-hand, things she had been doing since her early teens: showy, but not difficult. Now, of course, the tricks served to fill in the time until the proper moment for Florian's transformation.

As moonrise approached, she brought Florian out of his box and began to tell the story of how her poor assistant had encountered a dragon

Artwork by Jonathan Hunt

who had put him under an evil spell, which could be broken only by a maiden's kiss. She watched Florian carefully as she spoke, waiting for the right moment. To her relief, her timing was perfect, and the transformation went as smoothly as it had when they had been using sundown as the mark for it.

Jan relaxed now, prepared to run the rest of the act normally. But when they were almost at the end of the act, Florian suddenly nudged her, and she saw the shimmer that always proceeded his transformation. As the flash of light momentarily blinded her (she had failed to close her eyes as she usually did), she suddenly remembered the one thing she had forgotten to check in her calculations. *Lunar eclipses occur at the full moon.*

She could see again, but she was looking at a cape on the floor beside her. She bent and lifted it off Florian, whom she picked up and held in the palm of her hand, turning her head toward the audience. A roomful of wide-eyed people stared at them, and Jan said the first thing that came into her mind. "Have you ever noticed how hard it is to get good help these days?"

That got a good laugh from the audience and served to convince them that this was all part of the show. Now all Jan had to do was find a plausible way to finish off the act.

Is this an eclipse? If it is, how long is it going to last? She watched anxiously for any sign that Florian was going to change back, but he seemed solidly frog.

"Kiss him again!" a woman called from the audience. "Remember that love conquers all."

"I wish I believed that," Jan whispered to Florian. "Still, I suppose it's worth a try. Be human!" She leaned her face toward his.

Florian suddenly tensed in her hand, jumped forward, and touched his lips to hers. There was another blinding flash of light, right in her face, and a heavy weight pushed her arm to her side. Before her vision cleared, she was swept off her feet into a man's arms, and when she could see again she was cradled against Florian's bare chest, her arms wrapped about his neck for balance. She tightened her grip reflexively as he bowed to the audience, still holding her, even though his grasp on her was quite secure.

"True it is indeed that love conquers all," he said. "I have loved my lady here from the day I met her, and our love has freed me from the dragon's spell." He set Jan carefully on her feet and knelt before her, taking both her hands in his. "My lady, wilt thou marry me?"

What a great sense of theater! Jan thought, nodding her head. Under the

circumstances, she could hardly say no, and she was too stunned to speak anyway. The audience cheered loudly as Jan and Florian took their bows and Florian swept her into his arms again and carried her offstage.

They had barely reached their dressing room when the manager burst in. "Great ending!" he exclaimed. "We'll have no problem giving you a couple of weeks off now — we can say you're on your honeymoon. Or maybe you should get married on stage here — what do you think?"

Jan finally found her voice. "I think we should go home and discuss the details," she said. "This was a little sudden." She smiled shyly at Florian, who put a protective arm around her shoulders.

"Of course," the manager said. "Give me a call in the morning. Oh, congratulations."

"I thank thee," Florian said gravely.

They were both silent as they changed to street clothes and loaded the props into Jan's car. Jan had a lot of questions, but she certainly wasn't going to ask any of them until they were safely home.

As soon as she was inside the house, Jan grabbed the almanac, sat down on the sofa, and looked up lunar eclipses. She frowned in bewilderment. "I thought it must have been an eclipse," she told Florian, "that made you change back during the act, and there was an eclipse today, but it was only partial and hours before we even started the show. I don't understand."

Florian sat down beside her and put his arm around her. "I have seen many things I do not understand," he said. "But I understand that I love thee — perhaps the lady who said that love conquers all was correct."

"That was a great line, asking me to marry you," Jan said. "You really saved the show tonight; I just about froze up when you turned back into a frog."

"That was not a line," Florian said firmly. "I would be greatly honored if thou wouldst consent to be my wife."

Jan started to shake her head, more in disbelief than anything else, and Florian pressed his fingers to her lips. "Do not give me thy answer now," he said quietly. "Take time to consider it."

"Don't you think we should figure out what happened first?" Jan asked.

"No. I think the first thing thou shouldst do is go to bed and get some sleep. It has been a long day for thee." He picked her up again and carried her to her bedroom. Jan was too tired to protest, and she discovered that she rather liked being carried about. There was something oddly reassuring about it.

But when Florian set her on her bed, lay down beside her and began to nuzzle on her neck, Jan decided that this was not a good time to let her hormones override her brain. "Florian," she said firmly, "there *are* worse things than being a frog."

Either the threat worked, or Florian's sense of chivalry prevailed. He dropped one final chaste kiss on her cheek and left the room.

Jan got up long enough to strip off her clothes and put on a nightgown and then fell asleep the second she got back into bed.

When she woke again it was midmorning and the sun was streaming in through her window. She threw some clothes on and headed for the kitchen, calling a greeting to Florian as she passed through the living room. But instead of the usual croak from the aquarium, the reply came from a human sitting on the sofa. Jan stopped in her tracks and stared, then narrowed her eyes to use her other sight.

"Looks like the spell's gone to another layer," she informed him. "We'll have to work out the new parameters."

"I have been working with it since dawn," he replied. "It seems to be under voluntary control."

"What?" Jan asked in astonishment. There was the usual flash of light, and a frog sat on her sofa, looking at her expectantly. She walked over, knelt beside it, closed her eyes, and kissed it, keeping her eyes closed. She had been temporarily blinded quite enough the night before. When she opened her eyes again, Florian was in human form.

"I can do it whether thou dost kiss me or no," he explained, "but now we do not have to worry about timing the kiss so precisely."

"We'll have to wait a day or so to be sure that the spell isn't influenced by the sun or moon," Jan said cautiously, "but if you can control it, we can do the act anytime."

Then she realized what this meant to Florian, rather than to her magic act. "You can be human all the time if you wish now," she said. "You don't have to turn into a frog, if you don't want to." She forced herself to smile. "I'm really happy for you."

"But something troubles thee," Florian said.

"Well, it *was* definitely the best magic act I ever had." *I'm not going to cry,* Jan told herself firmly. *He is a sentient being with a right to his own life — he is not my property.*

"I have become quite comfortable being a frog," Florian said. "I do not mind at all doing it professionally, so long as I can be human when I wish."

Jan nodded. "That was the first half of my part of the bargain. Now all I have to do is figure out a way to send you home."

I don't want to send you anywhere, she realized suddenly. *I don't want to lose you. I love you. But I did promise, and I keep my promises.*

Florian bent his head and kissed her. To Jan's relief he remained in human form — she had been half-afraid that if he kissed her again he'd turn back into a frog. "My love," he said firmly, "I *am* home."

❄

Elisabeth Waters is the author of a novel, **CHANGING FATE**, and numerous short stories. "A Prince Among Frogs" is a sequel to her stories "Weather Witch" in issue #9 (reprinted in **BEST OF MZB's FANTASY MAGAZINE 2**), "Things That Go Grump in the Night" which appeared in Jane Yolen's anthology **THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT**, "Dragon in Distress" in **SWORD & SORCERESS 12** and "The Birthday Gift" in **SWORD & SORCERESS 9**.

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Vote for your favorites — Cauldron ballot on p. 64

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

Why I'm Traveling

by Michael H. Payne

It all began with corn fairies, I guess.

Titus Timson was fascinated by them, you see, would sit on the front porch every evening watching them in the fields, blue flashes in the moonlight, till his parents had to drag him inside. "Some day," he would say as they maneuvered him up the stairs, "I'm gonna catch me a corn fairy to be my very own and have right here in a jar beside my bed."

His parents would just nod and smile: Giles had worked the fields of the Timson farm outside St. Ives ever since he could walk, and Martine ran her family's shoe shop just off Water Street, so they both knew about corn fairies, had grown up with the same secret ambition — to catch one — without ever getting any closer than a cat gets to pond water.

One September night, though, a quarter of a harvest moon waxing outside, an hour after putting Titus to bed and considering dousing the lights, they heard a scratchy sort of knock at the front door. They looked at each other, Giles opened the door, and in hovered a band of corn fairies, straining over a bundle all wrapped in corn silk like a fly in a spider's web, a bundle they dropped onto the floor.

Martine found her voice first. "Forgive me, but may I ask what this, uhh, this thing is you've brought us?"

"Your son," came a surprisingly loud voice, and one corn fairy no bigger than a tall man's thumb whooshed up, overalls a bright blue, arms crossed, hammer and whisk broom hanging from its belt, its cap that of a corn fairy strawboss. "He snuck out into the fields with a mason jar, managed to capture one of my crew." The fairy shook its head. "You should have taught him better manners while you had the chance."

The Timsons stared a moment, then burst into frenzied questions, the strawboss answering quite calmly: no, Titus was not dead. He was merely wrapped. Yes, the fairies could unwrap him. But no, they weren't about to. "This business is rough enough without peculiarly stealthy human kits. No, he stays wrapped. Maybe after the harvest —"

"But that'll be three months!" Giles couldn't keep from yelling. "How can he… how will he live till then?!"

"Not my concern." The corn fairy brushed at its overalls. "My concern is for this harvest and for my crew."

And then, well, I don't think I have to tell you that the Timsons pleaded with the corn fairies, got down on their knees begging and promising anything and everything till the strawboss held up a hand. "What you could do," it said, silver sparking at its wings, "and I doubt you can, but you could get us a cinnamon-spiced pumpkin cake baked by Treel Shanda. Do that, and we could maybe consider letting bygones be bygones."

Martine could barely swallow. "But Treel Shanda's been dead for fifteen years! How are we supposed to —"

"Yeah, I didn't think so." The sparks faded from the corn fairy's wings. "If we remember, we'll come back after the harvest." And the strawboss moved to join the other corn fairies buzzing over the corn-silk-wrapped bundle.

"No! Wait!" both Timsons shouted. The strawboss looked back, and Giles said, "We'll try, really! But if we do get one, how will you know? How can we contact —"

"Believe me," the strawboss said, "we'll know. Nothing in this whole wide world ever smelled as sweet as a cinnamon-spiced pumpkin cake from the hands of Treel Shanda. You find one, you'll see us around: count on it." The corn fairies all laughed, a sound like wind through corn tassels, and the swarm fluttered out through the open door and into the moonlight.

There wasn't much sleep in the Timson household that night, and the next morning, they headed into St. Ives carrying the bundle that was their son, Martine to open her shoe shop as usual, and Giles to head over to Shanda's Bakery.

Casheel Shanda runs the place now, and Giles told her everything. She brushed flour from her hands and frowned. "Well, I still use Ma's recipe,

With a Talking Cow

but it's not like I have one of her cakes lying around from fifteen years ago."

Giles tapped his fingers on the display case. "Well, maybe a cinnamon-spiced pumpkin cake from Treel Shanda's own recipe would be good enough. You think?"

"It couldn't hurt to try," Casheel Shanda offered.

But a voice behind them said, "It just might, though."

They turned, and there in the doorway stood the wizard Otho Dagrasell. "I've dealt with corn fairies before, Mr. Timson," the wizard said. "Once they've set their minds on something, they accept no substitutes. And if the offer insults them, they may not return to unwrap the child at all."

The way Giles told it to me, he didn't think twice about Dagrasell just happening by. "I often see the wizard walking the streets, mumbling to himself — he's even bought shoes from my wife once or twice. And besides, Shanda's is the best bakery in the whole valley."

But I wasn't so convinced. Since I've been circuit magistrate around St. Ives, I've had Dagrasell up before the bar seven times on counts of magical misconduct, ranging from his conviction under the anti-cursing statutes during a dispute with Tor Chorvos last year, to the time I caught him crouched over the crib of Charity McTeague, trying to capture three puffs of her breath. Not enough to earn him a place on Her Majesty's list of evil sorcerers, sure, but still, he's never struck me as the sort you just run into at the local bakery.

To Giles, though, his appearance was a godsend. "Please, sir, any advice you could give me...."

The wizard was stroking his beard. "Perhaps if we were to summon Treel Shanda from the Great Beyond, she could supervise the baking. Corn fairies understand a sort of hierarchy: that might be enough for them."

Casheel had no objection as long as she could be present, so they decided to meet at the bakery after closing time, Dagrasell with his equipment, and they would call Treel Shanda from the Great Beyond.

Martine wasn't too thrilled when her husband presented the plan to her. "Wizards and ghosts always want payment." She spread her hands. "But, yes. What else can we do?" So, at dusk, she headed back home with the bundle of her son, and Giles went across the town square to Shanda's Bakery.

Dagrasell was already there, a big, plaid satchel beside him, braziers sputtering in the corners of the room, dark tapestries over the windows, bottles and small metal containers scattered across every countertop. A book lay propped open in front of him, and he was down on the floor drawing shapes with a piece of chalk. The ovens made the place plenty warm enough, the air still full of freshly baked scents, but Dagrasell's murmuring set Giles to shivering, and as time went on, the smell became much drier, dusty almost.

Slowly, something vaguely human-shaped and shimmering took form in the center of the bakery. Dagrasell got to his feet and gestured to Casheel Shanda. "Call her," he said. "Call her as you did in life."

Casheel swallowed. "Mother? Is that you?"

The cloudy form seemed to shudder, and a woman's face appeared about where a face should have been. "Casheel?" a voice like rustling branches asked. "Daughter, I'd love to chat, but I'm rather busy right now: I've become Royal Baker to the Court of the Great Beyond, and they're forever having banquets and get-togethers. It's absolutely heavenly, so many wonderful folks, and so appreciative of well-baked goods! I can't even begin to tell you how —"

"Yes," the wizard cut in, "I'm sure, Ms. Shanda. But we'll only take a moment of your time, and, really, you're the only one in all the planes of existence who can help."

"Really?" The ghost cocked her head. "Well, I can spare a few moments, then."

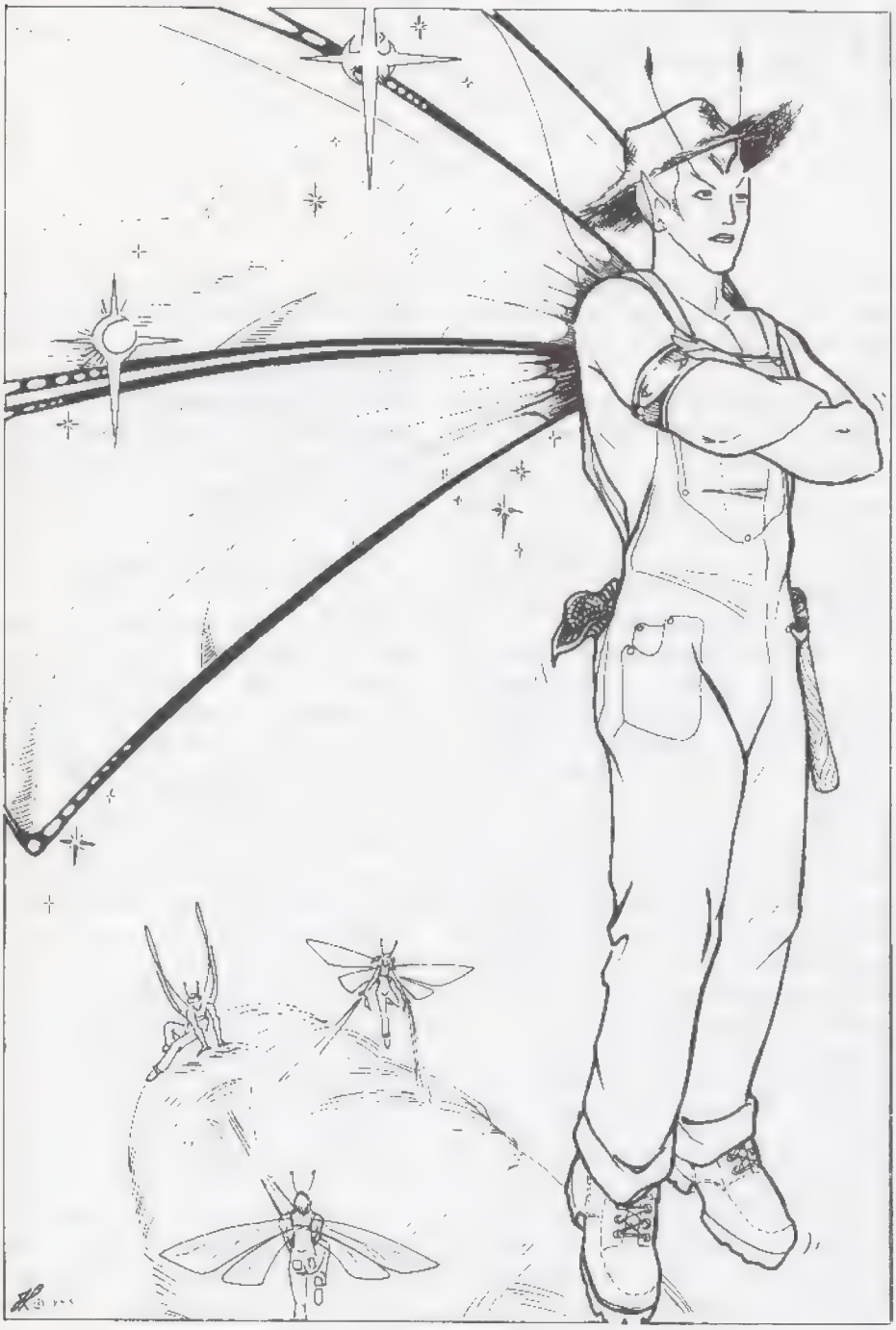
Dagrasell gestured to Giles, and Giles had to clear his throat several times: this was the first ghost he'd ever seen, he told me. But he managed to get the

whole story out, and when he was done, she nodded. "Always had to chase corn fairies away with a broom whenever I baked pumpkin cake. Never could understand it: corn fritters, they just look at funny, but pumpkin cake...." She shrugged her wispy shoulders. "Long as I'm baking here, I don't see why I can't whip you up a quick one: it'll only take an hour or so in your time."

Giles felt the grip on the back of his neck loosen. "Oh, Ms. Shanda, I can't thank you enough. If there's anything I, uhh, anything I can... can get to you, I... " He remembered his wife's words about payment and shuddered, not sure he wanted to know what someone in the Great Beyond might need.

But the baker's ghost was nodding. "Now that you mention it..." her hand drifted up to point at some ladders in one corner of the bakery. "All the wonderful things here in the Great Beyond, and I've yet to find anything so perfect as my second smallest stepstool for standing on while icing the swirls of a six-foot layer cake. You find a way to get that step stool over to me, and we'll call the whole thing even."

Giles stared for a moment, then turned to Casheel Shanda. "I'll buy you another stool just like it," he promised her, then, to the wizard: "Can you send it over?"



Dagrasell was already riffling through his book. "Somewhere..." he muttered. "Ah, yes." He poked a finger at a page. "It'll take about an hour to enchant."

"Perfect." The baker's ghost turned to Casheel. "Since all ovens are one when they're baking, daughter, I shouldn't have any problem getting the cake to you." Her flickering light began to fade. "Now I'm afraid I must be off. So nice talking with you all...." And she was gone.

Casheel sighed. "Once a baker, always a baker." She pulled the second smallest stepstool from the line, Dagrasell followed with his book, and Giles sat watching the wizard wave willow wands and tap small amounts of powder over the stool. About an hour later, the room filling suddenly with cinnamon scent, Dagrasell leaped to his feet, a glass jar in his hand, gave a shout, and dashed the jar against the stepstool. The jar didn't break, but the stool did, shattering and whisking away like a burned tree branch puffing to ash on the breeze.

The wizard leaned against the wall while Casheel went to the oven, mitts on her hands, and fished out a perfect golden brown loaf of cinnamon-spiced pumpkin cake. She smiled and set it on a cooling rack. "That's one of Ma's, all right."

Giles stepped up, took his wallet from his belt. "So, the price of the cake plus the price of the stool?"

"Charge you for the cake?" Casheel shook her head and quoted him a price for a replacement stepstool.

Giles paid her, then turned to where the wizard was gathering up bottles and tucking them into his satchel. Dagrasell smiled. "My price, Mr. Timson?" He reached into his robes and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

Giles took it. "What? Your bill?"

"No, no. Just a small service you can perform for me."

"Service?" Giles unfolded the paper and saw several words written carefully upon it. I'll not repeat those words here for reasons you'll soon see. Giles looked back at the wizard. "What is it?"

"A spell. A spell to give thought and speech to a cow."

Giles blinked. "A... a cow?"

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

Dagrasell nodded. "Somewhere in this valley, Mr. Timson, there is a cow upon which that spell will work." He snapped his satchel shut. "I am asking you to find me that cow."

"Find it? But... but how am I supposed to —"

The wizard tapped the paper. "Go from pasture to pasture and read these words aloud. The cow that looks up and asks you what you're talking about is the cow you can deliver to my lab on Teal Street." He bowed and opened the bakery's side door. "Good evening to you both."

Giles and Casheel gave each other shrugs, then she got out a box for the pumpkin cake, he tucked it under his arm, thanked her, and set off for home. He'd barely gone a block before silver and blue sparks surrounded him, and that same corn fairy strawboss swooped down. "It's... it's... it's a..." The corn fairy spun in place. "How did you ever come up with a Treel Shanda cinnamon-spiced pumpkin cake?!"

"Never mind that now." Giles covered the box as best he could, corn fairies perching on his arms, their eyes closed, grins stretching all the way around their heads. "It's all yours after you unwrap my son."

"A deal," the strawboss said, and away it flashed, the swarm of corn fairies following. Giles continued, quickening his step, and arrived home to see the door open. He rushed in, and there sat his son on the floor, corn fairies with tiny scissors snipping the last strands of corn silk from around his feet, Martine smiling through her tears.

They rushed to Titus's side as the boy sat up blinking, and the corn fairy strawboss zoomed into Giles's face. "Good as new, see? Now, our cake?"

Giles raised the box, and it was suddenly aswarm with buzzing, glowing corn fairies. They lifted the box from his hands, whooshed out the door, and the house was quiet again.

Titus was still a bit woozy when they took him up to bed, but he muttered, "Next time, I'll just watch 'em work."

Downstairs again, Giles told Martine what had happened at the bakery, and she shook her head. "In a wizard's debt is an itchy place to be. I'll take a shift reading to the cows when I can, Giles, but with harvest coming on, folks are needing their shoes. I'm fairly well swamped at the shop."

So they set up a schedule: the first week, Giles started his chores an hour earlier and spent the time each afternoon visiting the pastures around the Timson farm, calling out to the herds grazing there. None looked up.

The second week, Martine took the paper into town, spoke to any cows being led past her shop, but again, nothing. The third week, Giles got up two hours early, hiking each afternoon into the valley south of St. Ives to shout the wizard's words at whatever cows he saw, all to no avail. The fourth week, Martine rose early, went through town to the pastures in the west valley, calling the words till her voice ran hoarse, getting back to the shop sometimes an hour late, her customers grumbling outside. And not a single cow responded.

They each kept up a brave face at home, but when I talked to them afterward, both Giles and Martine confessed how they privately despaired of ever finding this cow, how, exhausted as they were from the search, sleep came harder and harder as the weeks dragged on.

So, with his mind numb and his body number, Giles Timson got up three hours early that fifth week, worked his fields, and set off for the hills north of St. Ives, yelling out the words he could never seem to memorize no matter the hundreds of times he had spoken them this past month.

And that afternoon, in a rocky meadow halfway up the slope toward the woods above town, a reddish cow with a few white spots raised her head from among a dozen or so lighter colored cows and asked, "Excuse me, but what was that again?"

The other cows started at the sound, but none more violently than the one who had spoken. "What," she stammered, eyes wide, "what... what did I... did I... I... "

"Yes!" Giles shouted, pounding the top of the fence.

The reddish cow whirled. "You! You did this to me?!"

"Uhh, yes, yes, I did." Giles hadn't actually planned this far in advance, and his throat went dry as the cow stalked toward him: all the cows he'd seen, he told me later, and this was the first time he'd noticed they had horns.

She reached the fence and fixed her burning eyes on him. "Then you will undo it. Now. Do I make myself clear?"

"Uhh, yes, uhh, ma'am, but I — "

"No buts!" She looked away, and Giles heard the sharp intake of her breath. He followed her gaze and saw the little herd wandering away. The cow swung her head back. "Now!" she shouted. "Please! Before they — " She turned again, and Giles could only stare from her to the other cows slowly disappearing among the rolling hills until they were gone.

The cow's head dropped. "Doomed," Giles heard her mutter. "Cast out and doomed...." Nose scraping the dry grass, she began clomping up the hill along the fence.

A shiver iced down Giles's spine. "Wait!" He ran to catch up and, walking beside her, the fence between them, he told her everything: the corn fairies, the baker's ghost, the wizard and his price. "I'm sure Otho Dagrasell can change you back, and I can take you to him. Please, won't you —"

"Ha!" The cow wheeled on him. "You curse me like this, and then you ask me for a favor?!" They had come to the edge of the woods now, the fence cutting away from the road to the right, separating the trees from the pasture; the cow took a few steps back, charged the fence, leaped it, her udder just clearing the top rail. She turned again to Giles, spat into the dirt, and started up the road into the woods.

Giles followed, of course, pleading with her, till she spun around in the forest's twilight. "My father fought in your bullrings, human; shall I show you what he taught me?!"

Now, this is about where I came in. I'd been making my rounds of the mountain villages, camping in the woods and looking forward to a warm bed in St. Ives, when I heard the argument ahead in the road. I came around a bend, and there was a man, short but broad, his hat clenched between his hands, facing a cow, and she was yelling, "I'd rather take my chances on this spell wearing off than hand myself over to you! I know what your kind does to mine!"

"I'm sorry!" The man mashed his hat some more. "I didn't think —"

"Ha!" The cow kicked at the road. "Of course you didn't think! This vaunted human intelligence is a curse to everyone it touches, and I for my part will have nothing to do with it! So get away from me, or I'll knock you back down the hill!"

Her muscles tensed, and she looked like she was about to rush him. "Whoa!" I shouted, pulling my badge from my coat. The cow whirled, and I kept my

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

hands out, my badge forward. "I'm Magistrate Robur, Ninth Circuit. I just want to help."

"Help?!" The cow's tail lashed. "The day I need help trampling an idiot like this — !"

Giles was happier to see me. "Magistrate! Thank the skies!" He began babbling the whole story, ending with: "I didn't mean any harm; I was just doing what the wizard asked!"

I looked up from the piece of paper Giles had given me, the one with the spell on it. "Excuse me, ma'am, but, well, I don't see that thought and speech are such terrible things."

"Ha!" She had been cropping grass at the side of the road, snorting every once in a while during Giles's speech. "They are human things, and with you so dependent on us for food, clothing, and entertainment, you'll forgive me if I'm not overjoyed at being dragged down to your level, forced to form words where I've never needed them before, cast from the company of my fellows, doomed to a — !"

Giles was wringing his hat. "I said I was sorry!"

"Ha!"

I held up my hands. "As Her Majesty's representative, I'll be glad to help out here if the two of you consent."

"Of course," Giles said. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The cow snorted. "Oh, yes, by all means. Human justice is just what I'm after." She tossed her head. "If it's all the same to you, I'll just stay here and wait this thing out."

I shrugged. "That's your prerogative. But most spells of this sort need counterspells to cancel their effects."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're a wizard?"

"Not really." I took out my badge again. "But in my line of work, I have to be familiar with magical functions."

The cow sneered, an expression I hadn't thought a cow's face could pull off. "Human distinctions." She nodded at my badge. "That means nothing to me: why should I trust you?"

"I can't answer that, ma'am. All I can say is that you might have a case against the wizard who gave Mr. Timson this spell, and I'll be glad to pursue it, if you'd like."

She continued to glare at me for a moment, then puffed out a breath. "Fine. Let's all go see this Otho Dagrasell. My afternoon's shot anyway." She leveled her horns, her eyes fixed on mine. "But the minute I see something I don't like, you'll know about it, Robur."

I bowed. "We have a deal, then." I gestured back down the road. "Shall we get on into town? It'll be dark soon."

Giles nodded, the cow blew another warm gust into the dirt of the road, and the three of us headed into the valley. Giles, it seemed to me, would be done with his part of this as soon as he delivered the cow. But the cow herself, now....

I took the paper with the spell on it from my pocket. The basic 'animal speech' syllables and the variants to make it cow-specific were clear enough, but parts of it I couldn't figure out at all, whole stretches of letter combinations that I couldn't begin to fathom.

And the control patterns were missing, nothing there to bind the animal's allegiance to the caster, something that made no sense to me at all.

I turned this all over in my mind without reaching any sort of conclusion, and by the time night had fallen, we were passing into St. Ives and heading for Teal Street, the lamplighters touching their wick poles to the streetlights as we went. I'd been to Dagrasell's digs before, a windowless two-story at the very end of Teal looking just like the warehouses around it except for the lawn, the hedged-in walkway leading to the front door, and the porch light glowing over it.

I gestured for Giles and the cow to precede me up the walk, so Giles swallowed, stepped up to the door and knocked. A moment later came the sound of a bolt being thrown back, and Dagrasell stepped out wearing a red robe, a fez perched on his head. "Why, Mr. Timson!" His eyes widened as he focused past Giles. "And you've brought guests! I know Magistrate Robur, of course, but who's your bovine friend?"

"Ha!" The cow pushed past Giles on the narrow walkway. "Don't play the innocent, wizard! I've been led to understand that you sent this human out to find me specifically!"

I stepped up behind the cow. "You've got some questions to answer, Dagrasell. You know the drill: do you invite us in, or do I invite you down to the sheriff's office?"

Dagrasell blinked. "I see. Well, I'll invite you in, then, just to clear things up." He stepped aside, pushed the door open wider, and gestured for us to enter.

Giles looked back at me. I nodded, and he walked in followed by the cow. I stepped carefully after them, Dagrasell smiling from the doorway, but I saw his hand move, and in a flash, the Death Magic he'd set in the floor snatched me up and slammed me spread-eagle into the wall.

It only pinned me there, of course — one of the qualifications for this job is a natural anti-magic aura, and with Her Majesty augmenting it, even dragons think twice about tangling with us — but the impact knocked the wind out of me, made me go numb all over.

"Yes!" I heard Dagrasell shout. My ears popped, and I looked up to see the room had gone all red, Giles and the cow glancing about in the center, Dagrasell striding toward them. "Now," he said, snapping his fingers to make a large book on a stand appear, "we haven't much time."

I almost had my breath back. "What is the meaning of this?!" I coughed out. "When I get free, Dagrasell — "

"Which will take you approximately sixty more seconds," he said, paging furiously through the book.

I could already feel the bonds holding me to the wall loosening. "If that long. But when I do, I will place you under arrest for threatening one of Her Majesty's circuit magistrates, for endangering civilians, and for — "

"Feel free," he said, his finger running down a page. "But I rather think you'll be too dead for all that." He gave me a toothy grin. "No offense, Robur, but I've got to see if this spell works." He stabbed at the page, looked over his shoulder. "You! Cow! Come here and read this!"

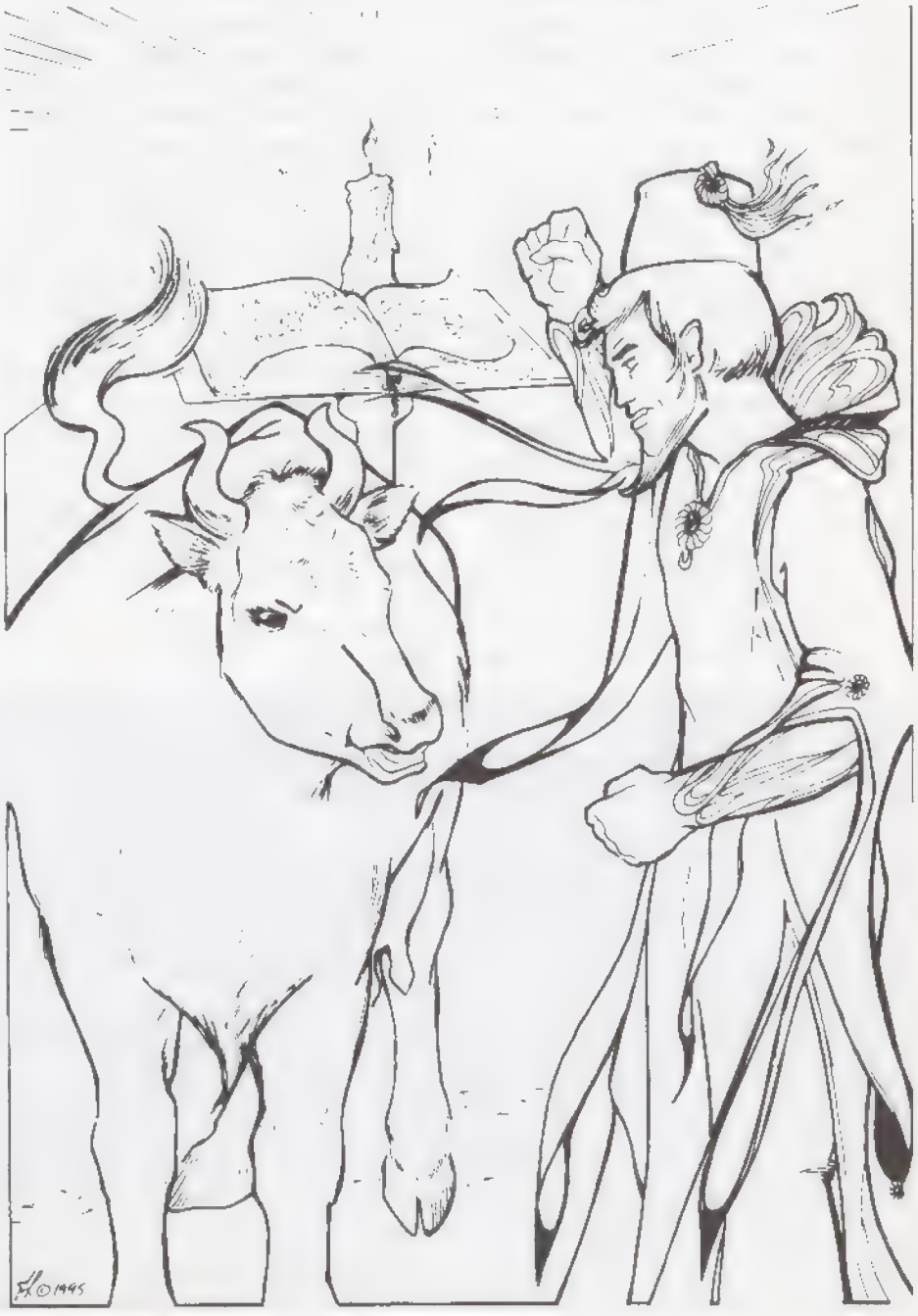
The cow blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Now!" he shouted. "Read!"

The cow drew her head back. "And why should I?"

I could see the tendons standing out on Dagrasell's neck. "I gave you that intelligence, cow! You must do my bidding!"

She smiled. "Strange: I feel no special compulsion."



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Dagrasell spun, his hand flashed, and blue fire crackled over Giles. Giles' body stiffened, his eyes rolled back. "With one snap of my fingers," the wizard went on, "I will kill the man who read you the spell! With his death, your intelligence will fade, and you will be nothing but a stupid, smelly cow again! Is that what you want?! To lose this wonderful gift of reason and return to the animal you once were?!"

"Gift?!" The cow snorted. "This reason of yours is nothing but a curse! Look at yourself and tell me again about the wonders of human intellect!"

Now it was Dagrasell's turn to blink. The cow stomped a hoof. "I care nothing for these humans, but I refuse to be forced into anything! Do whatever you're going to do, wizard, but don't expect me to fall simpering at your feet, begging to remain a freak and an outcast!"

Dagrasell stood staring at her, and I gave the binding one more push, felt it fall away. Fingers quickly to my mouth, I gave the summoning whistle, and the air seemed to explode, djinni of Her Majesty's Police bursting into the room with us. "Otho Dagrasell!" I shouted. "You're under arrest!"

The djinni swarmed over him before he could turn, and the blue fire dissolved from around Giles. I rubbed my wrists to get my circulation going and recited the wizard's rights. "Take him back to the palace," I told the djinn sergeant. "I'll present a full report to Her Majesty on my return."

The sergeant nodded, Dagrasell wrapped in a bright webbing, and the djinni all vanished, taking the wizard with them. I turned then, saw Giles rubbing his head, the cow standing beside him. "Are you both all right?"

Giles nodded, looked at the cow. "You could've just let him kill me," he said quietly. "That would've —"

"Ha!" the cow said, but it was a softer 'Ha!' than I'd heard from her before. "You were just as much a pawn in this as I was. He said the magistrate was bound for sixty seconds, so I only had to stall him." She turned to me. "Now, what was all this about?"

"I'm no wizard," I said, walking over to Dagrasell's book. "But I'll bet he's found a way to get Death Magic through a magistrate's protection aura."

I was just guessing, but it turned out I was right. The spell, though, had to be read by a cow of her own free will, a cow enchanted by someone who knew no magic. I also found out later that the spell he had given Giles had been altered to work only when I was within a quarter mile: Dagrasell had figured that if I came across a man and a cow talking, I would be curious enough to get involved, bringing both myself and the cow to his doorstep.

But as we stood in the wizard's room then, all I could do was shrug. "Everything else aside, Mr. Timson, the wizard has no further hold on you: you've fulfilled your agreement."

Giles nodded, then turned to the cow. "But... but what about you, ma'am? With the wizard in prison, how will you —"

She was watching me. "My question exactly."

I spread my hands. "There are friendlier wizards along the course of my circuit. If you'd like to come with me, I'm sure we can find one to reverse Dagrasell's spell: I wouldn't trust Dagrasell himself to do it right now."

"No," she said. "That wouldn't be too smart." She sighed. "I guess I'm coming with you then, Robur."

And that's why I'm traveling my circuit with a talking cow: Clovis, she decided to call herself. She's actually got a pretty good head on her shoulders, so to speak, but she's still determined to get rid of it. No wizard's been able to undo Dagrasell's spell yet, though, so who knows?

❄

MICHAEL H. PAYNE lives in a little town on the coast of southern California. He notes, "This story springs directly from MZB Talks to Writers in issue #25." (See this issue's editorial.) "Add a dash of Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories (I was reading them on my radio program at the time), open with 'As I was going to St. Ives...' (though I had to change that as the story grew), and the whole thing occurs naturally. Or something." He has previously had stories published in *Asimov's*, *Tomorrow Speculative Fiction*, and one of the Writers of the Future anthologies.

JULIA LACQUEMENT's work spans a wide range, from hard sf to the softest fantasy, from Asian still life to horror. [Eek!] Her creations are given life daily in her new studio in the Cascade foothills where she lives with her own private god of thunder.

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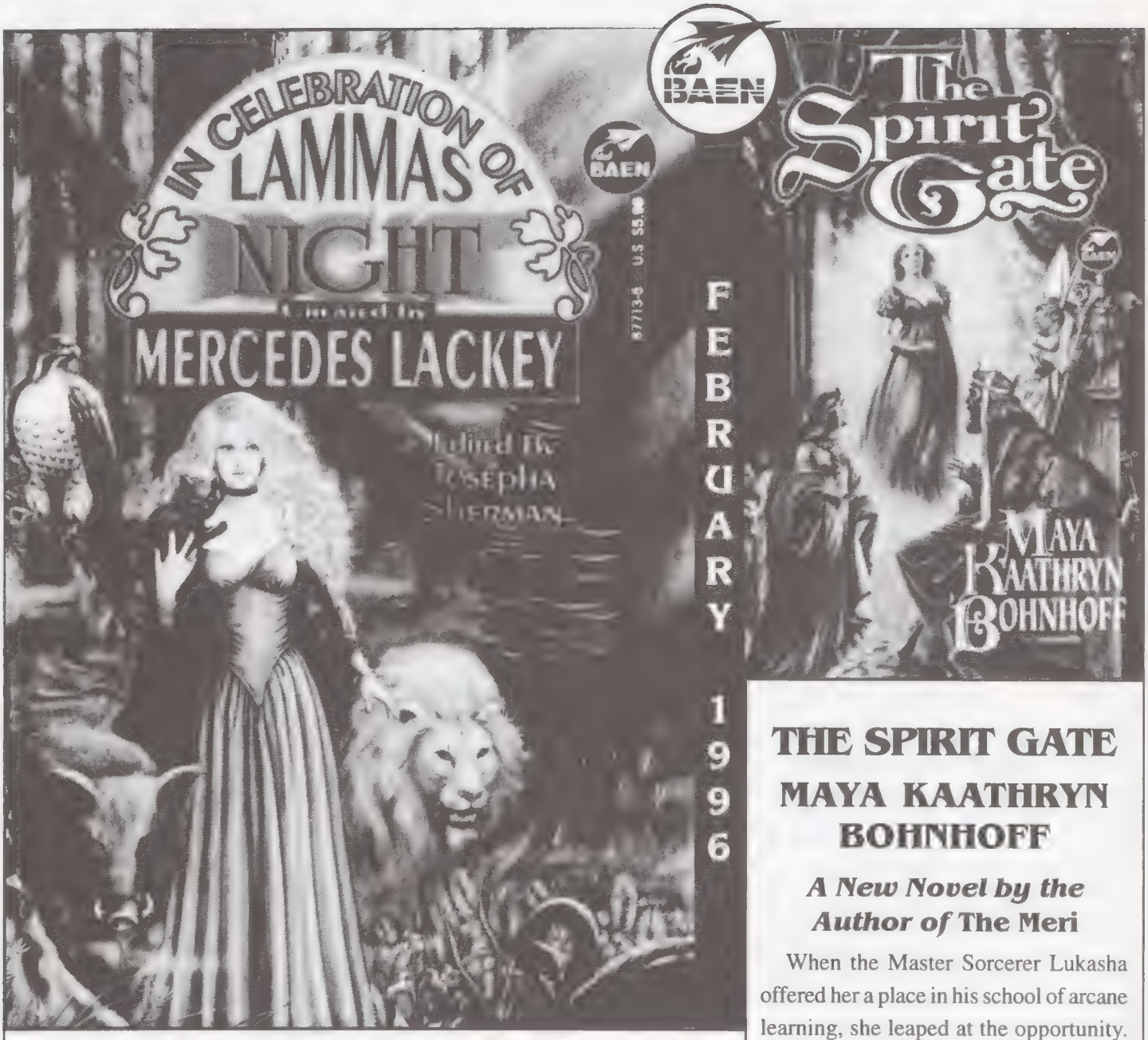
*The name comes from MZB's oft-repeated comment that "filking should be done in private by consenting adults."



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FATHERHOOD

by Steven Piziks

Thelan fell through the warm evening air. He could feel the earth below waiting for him to hit, but he swooped upward long before he came close to touching the ground. He skimmed the treetops, arms stretched straight out from his sides, chest just brushing the highest leaves, laughing at the sheer feeling of freedom.

Then he sensed the woman on the path below.

He felt the summer breezes swirling gently around her body like a second skin, rippling her dress, stirring her sweet-smelling hair. He grinned an exuberant grin and dove straight down.

This was, after all, why he had chosen to be male.

Wind rushed past his ears and air swirled about him as he landed on the path behind her, though only the sharpest observer would have noticed his feet didn't actually touch the ground — they remained the tiniest fraction of a thumb length above it. Thelan moved his legs back and forth and "strode" forward without a sound, but before he got three steps, the woman spun to face him.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

Thelan, startled, tensed to flee back to the summer skies, but then he paused. Something about her scent drew him, something he couldn't quite identify. He decided to stay.

"Hello," he said.

The woman drew back. "Who are you?" Her voice was deep and powerful. It also sounded vaguely familiar. But that was impossible. He was never drawn to the same person twice, and this woman's heady scent pulled at him. Strongly. He let his voice go soft and husky, the register that always attracted females.

"My name is Thelan." He stepped forward into a pool of moonlight, fully aware of the way it would show his strong, even features, raven-black hair, and well-developed body.

The woman shifted her basket and a variety of smells tinged the air — sharp rosemary, pungent sage, earthy mandrake. She was apparently gathering herbs by moonlight. This particular facet of the situation also seemed vaguely familiar, though Thelan couldn't think why.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, a little less belligerence in her voice.

Thelan put an easy grin on his face. "Is this private land?" He stepped forward. "I'll leave, if it is."

"I —"

"You're very beautiful," he said, taking another step forward. "What's your name?"

"Where did you come from?" she asked. Thelan didn't fail to note the breathlessness in her voice. "I didn't hear —"

"Does it matter?" Thelan glided close enough to put a hand on the smooth warmth of her bare shoulder. She trembled at his touch but didn't pull away. An intoxicating scent rose from her skin. "Does it matter at all?"

The woman looked up at him for a moment, eyes glassy and vacant, then stepped into his arms. Thelan embraced her with a sigh and ran his hands through thick, glossy hair that smelled of sweet herbs and wood smoke. Desire surged almost uncontrollably, making him shudder, but he forced himself to go slow, to prolong the pleasure. His hands moved lower, but she abruptly took the initiative and brought his arms around so she could kiss his palms. Thelan closed his eyes, enjoying the play of her soft lips on his hands —

— and screamed as something cold and burning clamped around his wrist. His feet slammed into the ground. Jolted, Thelan lost his balance and fell to the hard, dusty earth.

The woman poked him with a foot. "Get up," she growled.

Thelan lay motionless, unable to move or think. Pain pounded his limbs where they touched the ground.

"I said, get up," the woman said, prodding him again.

Thelan tried to speak, but his voice caught in his throat. His wrist throbbed with a cold heat. He coughed and tried again.

"What did you do to me?" he moaned. "Sacred air — what did you do?"

"The same thing you did to me," the woman replied with satisfaction. "Now get up. You can't fly anymore, but I know you can walk."

Thelan tried to leap into the air. Nothing happened. His body remained heavy, chained to the earth. He managed to push himself into a kneeling position with his arms, suddenly realizing he was completely naked — his conjured clothes had vanished.

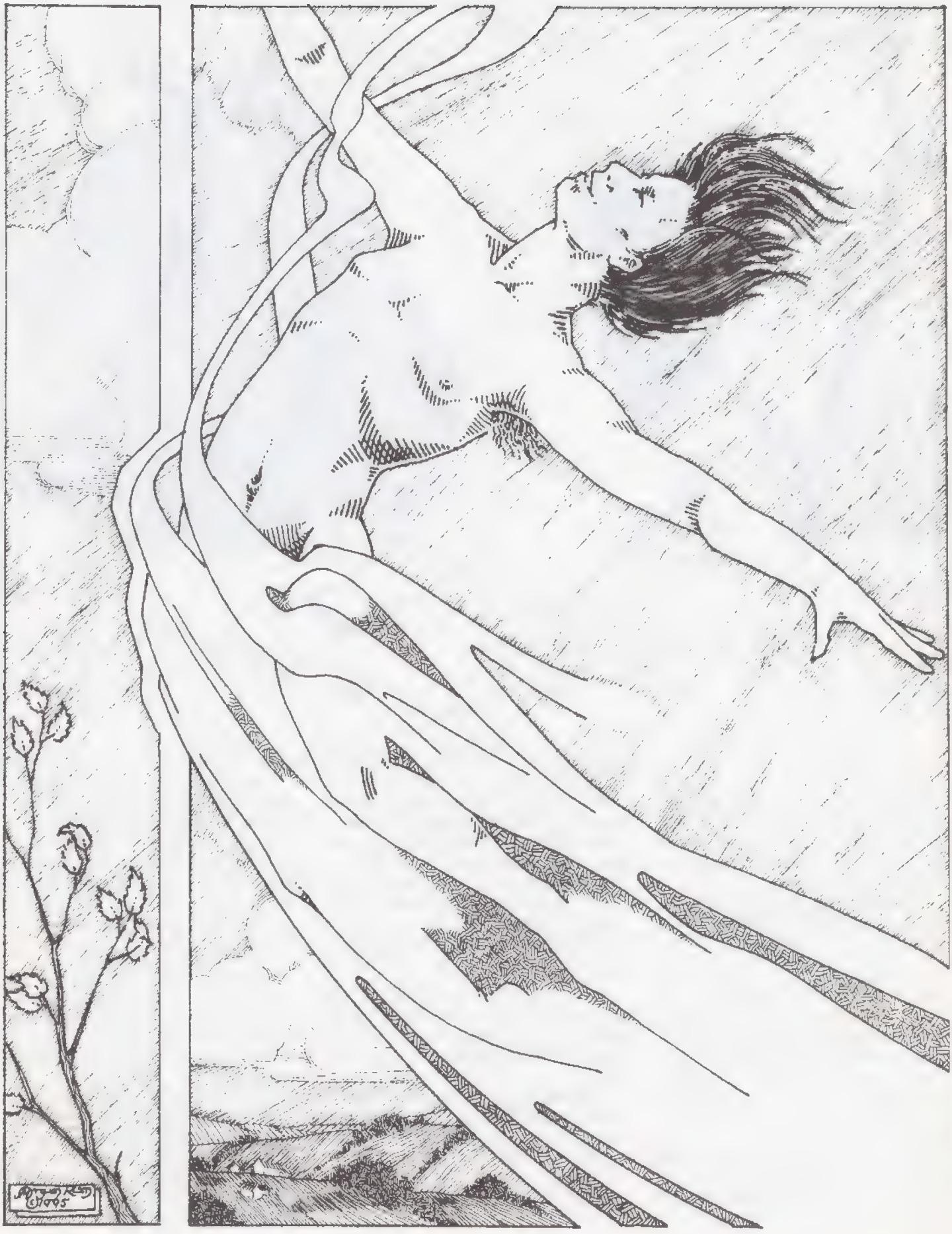
The woman watched dispassionately as Thelan staggered upright. The bottoms of both feet were planted firmly in the dust and his skin itched with it. He held up his left wrist, which still burned and chilled at the same time. An iron bracelet gleamed dully in the moonlight.

Iron. Distillation of the earth itself.

"What did you do?" he whispered.

"I told you, sylph," the woman replied. "Exactly what you did to me. I've chained you down. Here — take this. We're going home."

She thrust her basket into his hands and strode up the path. Dazed, Thelan clutched the basket and stared at her



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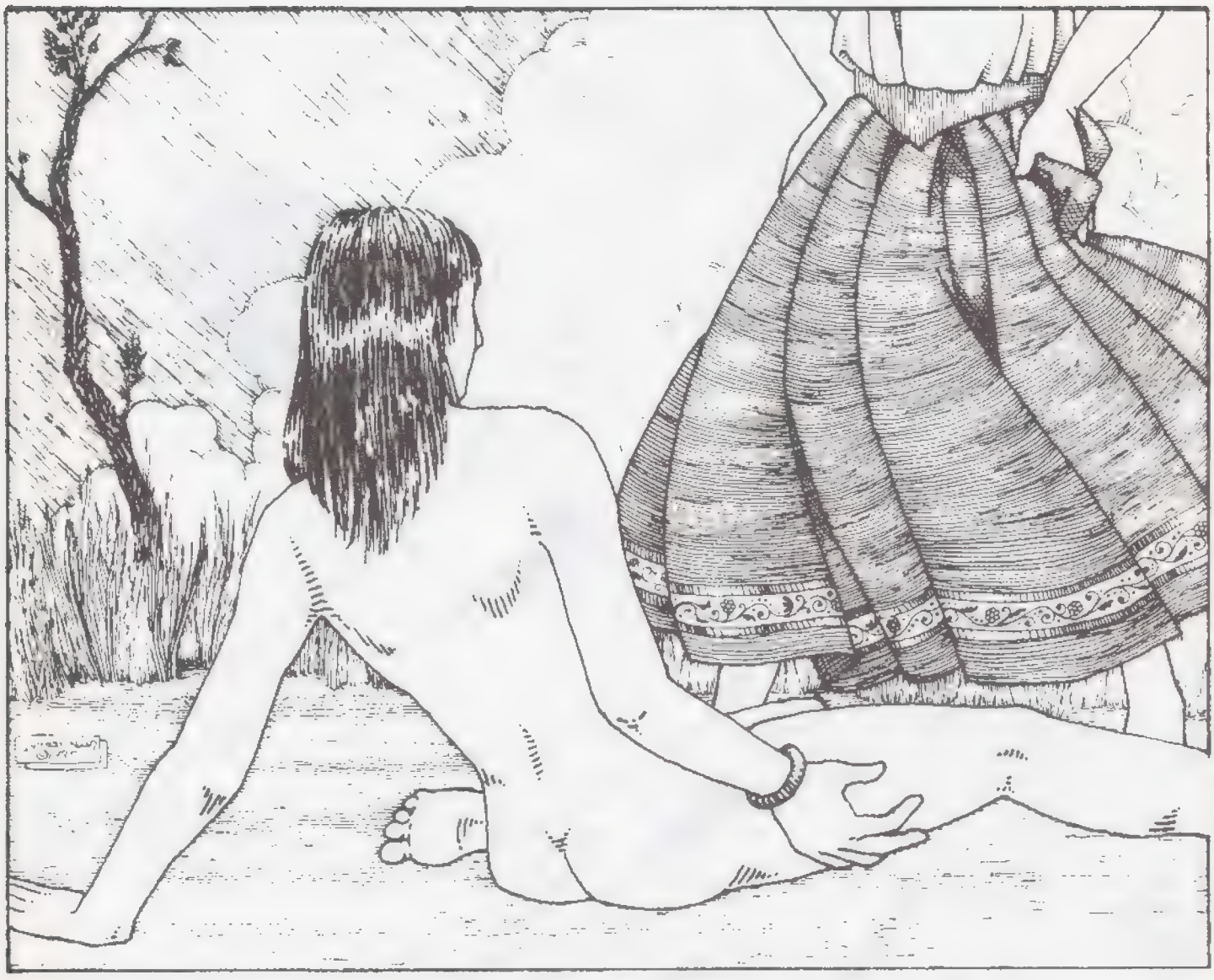

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retreating back for a moment, then stumbled after her. He had no choice — if she had chained him, only she could set him free. He wanted to ask the woman questions, but he could barely breathe, let alone speak.

Moments later, Thelan realized he was in worse trouble. Walking — real walking — was an entirely new sensation, and Thelan didn't like it at all. Dirt and small stones ground painfully into the soles of his feet and he constantly teetered on the edge of falling. He was glad to have chosen a well-muscled shape, or his legs would doubtless be as sore as his feet. The basket prickled his bare arms and chest, and sweat dripped down his face and body, both made gritty by the dust.

The dusty, silent journey went on and on. Just when Thelan was sure he was going to collapse, they came upon a small cottage. The woman wordlessly herded him inside and shut the door.

The cottage's single room was lit by a small fire in the fireplace. Thelan dropped the basket and collapsed panting on a wooden chair. The woman set the basket on the table and took up the chair opposite him. Herbs hung in great bunches from the ceiling.

"Tired?" she asked mildly. "In pain?"

Thelan nodded, still too out of breath to speak.

"Then you have some idea — only some, mind you — of what I went through." She leaned forward. "My name is Kolete. Do you remember me yet?"

"Remember you?" Thelan gasped. With an effort he heaved his arm up and let the bracelet land on the tabletop with a heavy thump. "Should I remember you?"

Kolete's eyes flashed and she crossed her arms.

"Let me go," Thelan abruptly begged. "Please. You don't know what it's like. It hurts. My body is so heavy."

"So was mine."

A wail pierced the cottage. Startled, Thelan twisted in his chair. "What is that?"

"That," Kolete said grimly, "is your daughter."

Thelan blinked. "Daughter?"

Kolete went to a cradle in the corner and picked up a small bundle. It was squalling lustily. Kolete opened the front of her dress and the squalling ceased, replaced by greedy suckling noises.

"This is Noira," Kolete said. "Your daughter. Now do you remember me?"

Thelan stared at her in the dim light. Kolete had a round face with wide, dark eyes and curly brown hair. The flush of youth had long passed, but it still left strong traces.

"I don't remember you," he said at last. "But I'm a sylph. We don't —"

"Is that an excuse?" Kolete demanded, still clutching Noira. "Look at me — I'm almost forty years old. Not two years ago, you caught me out gathering herbs and you seduced me, right there in the damn woods. Even while it was going on, I couldn't believe I was doing it."

"Your scent draws me, just as mine draws you."

"And then I turned up pregnant," she continued bitterly. "How was I supposed to be herb woman and midwife to a village with a bastard growing inside me? When my body grew heavy and the people lost their respect?"

Thelan shook his head. "What does this have to do with me?"

Kolete's eyes flashed again. "I want a father for my child."

Thelan's mouth fell open. His mind spun in circles, trying to assimilate this entirely new concept. Well, not entirely new. He knew he must be a father — several times over, in fact — but it had certainly never occurred to him to take responsibility for it. That wasn't the way the world worked.

"But I'm a sylph, not a mortal," he protested weakly, hating himself for the whining tone even as he spoke the words. "I know nothing about fatherhood."

"You should have thought of that," Kolete growled, "before tupping me in the woods."

"I can't —"

"You don't have a choice." Kolete shifted Noira, who was still nursing, and sat down. "I had a lot of time on my hands when I was pregnant, and I spent it learning all I could about you and your kind, sylph. I learned how you seduce people and how to counteract it. I learned what scents draw you and what time of night you like to fly. I learned that earth and air are always at odds, just like fire and water, and I guessed — correctly — that earth would bind you. You *will* stay with me as my husband and you *will* be a father to my child."

"But —"

"We'll tell the village that you left but felt guilty and came back," she went on. "So, *husband* — wash yourself and we'll go to bed."

She put Noira back in the cradle, gave Thelan a basin of water, and dressed for bed as he clumsily washed the grit from his face and body.

"Put this on," she said, handing him a nightshirt. Then she slid into bed and turned her face to the wall. Thelan hesitated, then climbed into bed next to her and surprised himself by almost instantly falling asleep.

"What does a father do?" Thelan asked the next morning as Kolete simultaneously nursed Noira and ate her own breakfast. Thelan, of course, didn't need to eat.

"You help raise the child," Kolete replied. "You protect her from danger and teach her what she needs to know. You feed her, take care of her when she's sick, and you change her."

Thelan wrinkled his forehead. "Change her? You mean transform her?"

"Change her diapers."

"What are diapers?"

A mean smile slid across Kolete's face. "As it happens," she said, "I can show you right now."

And over the next two weeks, Thelan learned all about diapers — and their horrible, cloying smell. Then he learned how to chop wood and draw water. He learned how to slaughter a chicken and weed a garden. He learned how to repair thatching and mend a fence. And the hated iron bracelet dragged at him through it all. When Kolete couldn't see, he dug and tore at it until his wrist was raw and oozing tendrils of mist. The sky called, the clouds whispered, the breezes caressed, but his cracked and blistered feet remained stubbornly on the ground.

"Does a father hold his child?" Thelan asked one evening as Kolete finished yet another nursing session with Noira. The baby certainly drank a lot of milk. She also put away a surprising amount of solid food.

Kolete looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"For two weeks I've been doing things you say a father does," Thelan said, "but you always hold Noira. Does a father hold his children?"

"Yes," Kolete answered, but she clasped Noira closer to her breast.

Thelan came around to Kolete's side of the table. "Then teach me how to do that, too."

Reluctantly, Kolete slipped Noira into Thelan's outstretched hands. "Be gentle," she said sharply. "Don't drop her. And don't —"

"I won't hurt her, Kolete," Thelan said. Noira made a warm, milk-smelling bundle in his arms. "I'm not angry at her for what her mother did to me."

Kolete flushed indignantly. "And what about what her father did to me?"

Noira laughed and put one tiny hand up to touch Thelan's face. Thelan looked down at her, and was hit by an odd realization. This baby had come from *him*. Without him — and without Kolete — she would not exist.

Noira grasped Thelan's finger with a surprisingly strong grip and babbled at him. She had sky-blue eyes and dark hair. Like he did. Like her father. Thelan looked at Kolete and noticed her face was tense and filled with unpleasant emotion. He blinked, puzzled.

"Is being hated by the mother part of being a father too?" he asked.

Kolete clamped her lips together and wordlessly took Noira back. She didn't speak for the rest of the evening and, as always, she turned her face to the wall as Thelan climbed into bed.

"I want to go down to the village today," Kolete announced. "Get Noira ready."

Thelan gathered extra diapers, Noira's carrybasket, and a winged horse Thelan had carved out of wood while Kolete packed herself a lunch. Noira laughed when she saw the horse and promptly put it into her mouth when Thelan gave it to her.

The road to the village was quiet and shaded. Thelan's soles had toughened in the past few weeks, so walking didn't bother him anymore, but he couldn't get used to the gritty feel of earth on his skin or of the cold, burning bracelet clamped to his wrist. He looked up between the trees to the sky and felt such an intense longing it brought tears to his eyes. But Kolete didn't seem to notice.

The village itself was surprisingly large and noisy. Powerful smells washed over Thelan as he followed Kolete toward the marketplace. Spicy cooking mingled with sweet fruit, smoky charcoal, and the caustic smell of chamber pots emptied into the street. People shouted at each other and horses clopped past, their sweat adding to the smells that clogged the air. Noira fussed in her carrybasket and Thelan swayed dizzily. It was too much. The air suffocated him, left him no freedom to move. He plucked at Kolete's sleeve.

"Get me away from here," he said

hoarsely. "Please."

Kolete opened her mouth to refuse, then looked at Thelan's pale face. Her expression softened and she nodded. Kolete took Noira's basket, towed Thelan into a nearby tavern, and quickly shut the door.

The smells were different inside — roasting meat, spilled beer, smoke. Not pleasant like Kolete's cottage, but not overwhelming, either. Thelan sighed in relief.

"Midwife Kolete!" A thin man with a large nose and bald head hurried over and blocked their way. Thelan supposed he was the tavern keeper, but he made no move to show them to a table. "It's been a long time. We haven't seen you since..." He glanced pointedly at the basket then looked over his shoulder, obviously hoping no one had seen Kolete yet. Noira babbled and waved her winged horse.

"Yes," replied Kolete. "I've been very busy, Edlin."

"Of course," Edlin said dryly. "And who is this? A new... escort? Someone to keep you company besides the little one?"

"This is my husband," Kolete said loudly. "Noira's father. He came back and we married."

Conversation at the tables died. For a brief instant the tavern crowd was staring at Thelan. Then they all realized they were staring at Thelan and quickly looked away. Conversation resumed, though the customers continued sending furtive glances in Thelan's direction.

"Your husband?" Edlin echoed. "I *see*. Just married, then? I didn't see any banns published."

"That's custom, not law," Kolete said. "Could we have a table, please? I wouldn't want to block the door if someone else comes in."

Edlin gave her a sour look. "Let me see if there's anything available."

He left to confer with one of the barmaids, then returned and lead them to a tiny table almost hidden in the corner.

"Dinner rush will be starting soon," he said as they sat down. "Don't you think the noise might upset the bas — baby?"

"Don't worry, Edlin," Kolete said tightly. "We won't be staying long."

Edlin, muttering to himself, withdrew.

"Why are they all looking at me?" Thelan asked in a quiet voice.

Kolete lifted Noira out of the basket and checked her diaper. "Because you're young, handsome, and paired with an older woman who has a baby. Of course, now that people know that I'm respectable —" her tone made it acidly clear what she thought about the concept " — they'll come to me for midwifery again and I won't have to worry about starving. That was the whole point of coming into town."

Noira squirmed out of Kolete's arms and crawled across the table toward Thelan. Before Thelan could pick her up, however, she reached out a hand and clearly pointed at him.

"Da," she said. "Da-da."

Kolete gasped. Thelan picked Noira up and tickled her, something he had learned from Kolete.

"Da-da," Noira giggled.

Kolete stared. Thelan looked at her.

"Kolete?" he asked. "What's — ?"

"Excuse me, Midwife Kolete," broke in a new voice.

Kolete's expression instantly cleared and she turned to face the newcomer, a stocky young man with sandy hair.

"Hello, Brant," she said. "What do you need?"

The young man twisted the cap in his hands. "Midwife Kolete, my... uh, that is, my wife is, well —"

"Is going to have a baby?" Kolete supplied.

The young man nodded gratefully.

"And you'd like me to midwife her?"

Another nod.

"Tell her I'll come by this evening to have a look," Kolete said.

Brant nodded one more time and backed away, still twisting his cap.

"Shy boy," Kolete commented. "Amazing he ever managed to propose."

"Why do I make you respectable?" Thelan asked. "You're the same person with or without me."

"Not according to them." Kolete jerked her head toward the room at large. "It's a great shame to be an unmarried mother. It doesn't help that every couple years, someone's cow dies and I get accused of witchcraft. It doesn't keep them away when they need a midwife, but once the baby's born, they seem to forget what I did for them." She leaned across the table. "And don't you breathe of word about your origins. There'd be a burning for sure."

"Da," Noira said happily, and a sharp, all-to-familiar smell filled the air. Thelan sighed and Kolete laughed.

"What's so funny?" he grumbled.

"The look on your face," she said, still grinning, and Thelan found himself beginning to grin back. Kolete didn't seem to notice.

"What about the look on my face?" he asked, trying not to smile at her.

"You get it every time you know it's your turn."

"It seems like it's always my turn," Thelan muttered. And Kolete laughed again.

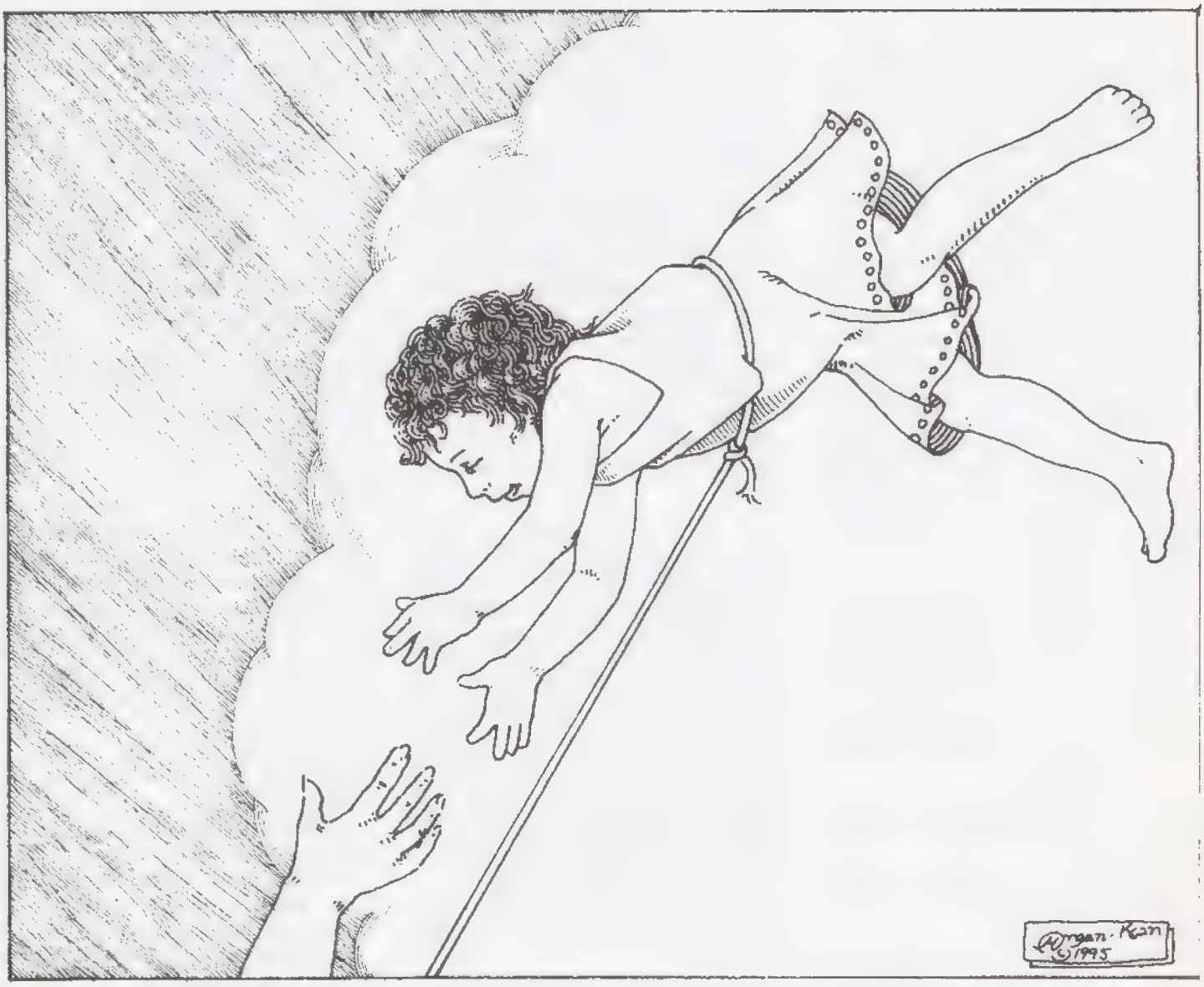
Over the next several weeks it became more and more Thelan's "turn." Kolete's cottage was inundated with visitors — blushing men seeking advice on fertility, swelling women looking for a midwife, concerned mothers with injured children. It was Thelan's job to keep Noira quiet and out of the way when Kolete had a client, though Kolete stole every moment she could to be with her daughter.

Thelan also noticed how Kolete underwent an almost startling change now that she was working. Her eyes sparkled, and her movements snapped with energy. She often hummed or sang as she worked, and her voice was low and sweet. He found himself looking at her more often. The iron bracelet that dragged unceasingly at his body killed any ability he might have had to act on a physical attraction, but he sometimes found himself wishing Kolete would pay the same attention to him that she paid to Noira. It was very strange.

It was also strange to Thelan that while Kolete had plenty of clients, it was obvious none of them really liked her — or him. They didn't spend any more time with Kolete than they had to, and none spoke more than two words to Thelan. More than one remarked in Thelan's hearing that there must be something wrong with a man who cared for a baby while his wife supported him. Kolete, however, didn't seem to notice the phenomenon, so Thelan decided to ignore it.

Noira, meanwhile, grew with a speed that Thelan found amazing. She could already toddle about the cottage and yard with astonishing speed, and the word "da-da" was quickly followed by several more. Although Thelan was initially entranced with her ability to talk, it wasn't long before he wished she could just as easily learn to be quiet.

"I don't know what to do sometimes," he complained after one particularly



Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

trying day. In the space of an hour, Noira had managed to upset the tin of goat's milk, pull a sack of flour off the table, spread a bundle of herbs from one end of the cottage to the other, and climb out of her clothes so she could run shrieking around the yard just as one of Kolete's clients dropped by.

Kolete, who was brushing her hair in preparation for bed, smiled softly, and Thelan's heart skipped a beat. None of the human females he had encountered were anything like Kolete, and with the bracelet binding him to earth, his memory had improved to the point where he could recall them. His previous partners had tended to be weak, easily giving in to their baser desires. But Kolete was stronger, which made her intriguing. Thelan could see the strength in her hands, hear it in her voice.

"It takes patience," Kolete said. "You have to teach her control. And it makes sense that the daughter of a sylph would be at least a little difficult to handle."

She slid into bed. Thelan climbed in beside her, an odd hope rising within him. Maybe tonight they could talk for a while. Maybe Kolete would let him touch her hair. Maybe —

Kolete turned her face to the wall. The bracelet burned on Thelan's wrist, and he felt suddenly empty and alone.

Noira giggled and stretched out her arms. "Higher!" she squealed. "Higher!"

"That's high enough," Thelan called. "Come down now."

"Higher!" Noira insisted. The rope around her waist tightened as she tried to float toward the sky, but Thelan refused to let it play out any further.

"I said it's time to come down," Thelan said firmly.

"Thelan," Kolete said, coming around the corner of the cottage with a bundle of mugwort, "where did you put —"

"Look what I can do, Mama!" Noira shouted.

Kolete screamed and dropped the mugwort. Startled, Noira dropped like a stone. Fortunately Thelan was ready and caught her before she hit the ground. Behind her, bushes rustled as some startled animal went crashing into the woods.

Kolete ran forward and snatched Noira from Thelan's arms. "What the hell were you doing?" she cried. "What did you do to my baby?"

"She's my daughter," Thelan replied in surprise. "Why are you surprised that she can fly? You told me to teach her the things she needs to know. And

she needs to know this."

"It's fun, Mama." Noira's voice was slightly muffled by Kolete's body.

Kolete swallowed hard. "I — I'm not —" She licked her lips. "Will she be able to do more than fly?"

"Powerful sorcerers always have some elemental blood," Thelan said. "Noira is half sylph."

Noira squirmed away from her mother. "It's fun, Mama," she repeated, toying with the rope around her waist. "I want to do it again."

Kolete's eyes flashed. "What if someone else had seen her?" she demanded. "How do you think the villagers would react if they saw something like that?"

"No one saw," Thelan said, though a note of uncertainly crept into his voice as he remembered the animal that had gone crashing away. "And better I should teach her how to control herself now before she does something by accident in public."

Kolete pursed her lips, but Thelan could see fear, not anger, behind her eyes. She stroked Noira's black hair. "What would happen if I forbade her to fly?"

"You couldn't," Thelan said softly.

"Good," Noira asserted with a firm nod. "I like flying."

Kolete looked away for a moment and ran a shaky hand through her hair. Thelan waited.

"I'm scared for her, Thelan," she finally said. "I'm her mother and I don't want to see her hurt."

"I don't either, Kolete. I'm her father."

"Can you fly, Daddy?" Noira asked.

Thelan looked down at the solemn face ringed with black curls. "I used to, sweetie. I can't anymore."

"Why not?" Noira asked.

"Do you miss it a lot?" Kolete asked suddenly.

Thelan looked up at the clear blue sky, at the clouds he used to be part of. They were a long way off, but he could smell their damp, cool freshness. His entire being longed for the total freedom of feeling nothing above, nothing below. But the bracelet on his wrist always weighed him down.

"Yes," Thelan said in a quiet voice.

Kolete's dark eyes met Thelan's blue ones. "If... if I removed the bracelet," she said, still stroking Noira's hair, "would you fly off? Would you forget me — us?"

Thelan's breath caught in his throat. He could see it. All he had to do was say no, that he would stay, that he wouldn't fly off and forget, and Kolete would let him go. He could fly again, vanish into the clouds, be free of the hated, burning bracelet.

But sylphs lived from one moment to the next, inconstant as the breeze. What if he did forget? Would he forget his daughter's sweet scent or the soft touch of her hand? Would he forget the beauty of Kolete's inner strength or the low sound of her laughter? What would his life be like then?

He stared into Kolete's eyes for a long moment.

"I don't know," he admitted.

Kolete nodded and the moment passed. Without a word, she took Noira's hand and lead her into the cottage.

"Kolete?" Thelan, arms loaded with heavy, scratchy logs, pushed open the cottage door with his foot. "I couldn't find any applewood, so I brought —"

Something smelled wrong. Kolete and Noira's scents were very faint and the sour odor of strangers washed over Thelan. Startled, he dropped the wood.

The cottage was a shambles. Herbs lay scattered over the floor, furniture was smashed and overturned. Thelan stared for a brief moment, then rushed into the cottage, pawing through mess, searching madly through the ruin.

"Noira!" he shouted. "Kolete!"

A small moan caught his attention. Thelan automatically tried to leap toward it —

— and promptly crashed to the floor. He picked himself up, ignoring the bruises, and scrambled across the room. Kolete's warm scent grew stronger. He flung aside a broken bench and found her lying beneath it. Her face was bruised and her arm jutted at an odd angle.

"Kolete!" he said, dropping to one knee beside her. "Sacred air — what happened? Where's Noira? Are you...?"

Kolete looked dazedly up at him. "Thelan?" she whispered.

Thelan's heart was pounding and his hands shook. Kolete was here, but Noira's scent was still weak. "Kolete, what happened? Where's Noira?" he repeated, forcing himself to keep his voice calm.

"Noira?" Kolete echoed stupidly. "She's —" Kolete shook her head and suddenly clutched at Thelan's shoulder with her good arm. "Thelan! They took her. She's gone!"

"*Who?*" Thelan almost snapped. "Kolete, who took her?"

"Edlin," Kolete said, and words tumbled out of her in a rush. "He saw you teaching Noira how to fly and he went back to the village and told them she was a witchling so they showed up with knives and pitchforks and when I tried to stop them they were going to take me too but Brant said I wasn't to blame because Noira was *your* daughter and they took her away."

She struggled to her feet, gasping when the effort jarred her broken arm. "Thelan, we have go get her. Those bastards are going to burn my baby!" She staggered toward the door, but didn't get three steps before leaning dizzily against a wall.

Thelan's head spun with rage and frantic worry. He would tear the village apart, stick by stone. He would snatch up the men who had dared touch his daughter and his wife — yes, his *wife* — and he would smash them on the rocks.

But the bracelet still burned cold and heavy on his wrist, weighing him down, holding him back.

He crossed the room and helped Kolete sink to a bench he hastily set upright.

"My head hurts," she said, leaning on his shoulder. "I can't focus."

Unthinkingly, Thelan stroked her hair. Kolete closed her eyes and relaxed under his fingers, but only for a tiny moment. She straightened. "We have to go, Thelan. Noira —"

"Kolete," Thelan interrupted, "you have to let me go." And he held out his wrist.

Kolete stared at him.

"I can't do anything when I'm bound like this," he told her. "And even if both of us were uninjured, we couldn't fight the entire village. You have to let me save Noira."

Kolete hesitated. "You might forget us. Once the iron is gone, you might fly off. There's another way. We just haven't seen it yet."

"I might forget. I might not." Thelan's voice began to shake, though whether with apprehension or anticipation, he couldn't tell. "Kolete, we have to *hurry*."

"What if you leave me?" Kolete almost whispered. "I'll lose my daughter and... and I'll lose you, too."

"I'm taking the same risk," Thelan said softly. "Please, Kolete. Let me save our daughter. I'll come back. I

promise."

Kolete looked at him. A dozen emotions crossed her face, but eventually she slowly nodded. "All right."

She took Thelan's wrist in her lap and, fumbling a bit with her single good hand, opened the clasp. Thelan trembled as the bracelet fell to the floor with a clank. The cold, burning weight vanished and Thelan sprang away from the bench. He was free! No part of him touched the ground, nothing met the earth. Senses long imprisoned sprang into being and Thelan could feel the air swirling around him, taste it currents, hear it whisper. Without looking back, he fled out the open door and soared into sky, arms outstretched, completely free.

Laughing, he somersaulted into the center of a passing cloud and twisted the mists into a personal cloak. The breezes answered his call, welcomed him back with a gentle caress. Thelan laughed again and dove toward the ground, trailing bits of cloud behind him.

Below, he could see a large group of buildings clustered together. In the center was an open space. A crowd of figures had gathered around a pile of wood, where another, smaller figure was tied to a stake. Thelan shook his head. Strange mortals.

He circled the village once, turned toward the distant mountains, then paused. Something tugged at him, tentative as a tendril of fog. A trace of a scent wafted by and Thelan seized it. The scent conjured the image of a warm place, an important place. One with many interesting smells.

Below, tiny bits of torchlight flickered among the crowd of mortals. First one, then another and another threw their torches onto the pile of wood.

Thelan twisted his head around, trying to locate the source of the maddeningly familiar scent. A strand of hair caught on his shoulder captured his eye. He pulled it free and sniffed it. More images poured into his head. Working, sweating, longing. Laughing, singing, playing. Thelan hung suspended between the images. They called to him, made him feel *full* somehow. Yet they also dragged him down, pulled him back to the hated earth.

Beneath him, fire crawled hungrily toward the figure tied to the stake. Shaking, Thelan twisted the single hair around his wrist like a bracelet and inhaled its scent again. A face popped into his head, quickly followed by another. A woman with a low laugh and a child with dark hair, raven-black like his own. Part of him wanted to push the image away, but another part rose up and sharpened it. A child's laughter, a soft hand —

"Noira!" Thelan cried, and he shot down toward the village. He heard Noira's terrified scream as the flames licked at her dress and the mob of villagers cheered.

"Burn her!" shouted Edlin the tavern keeper, and the rest of the village took up the chant. "Burn her! Burn her! Burn the witch!"

Thelan, still diving for the square, reached out with both hands and *pushed*. A powerful wind lashed downward, whipping the flames away from Noira and blowing most of them out. Thelan landed on the pile of wood.

"Daddy!" Noira shrieked, and Thelan smelled the salt and soot that streaked her face.

The crowd, startled into silence by the sudden wind, stepped back a pace, uncertain what to do. With a strength too-long denied him, Thelan snapped the ropes that held Noira and she flung herself into his arms. He took a moment to inhale her sweet, familiar fragrance.

The villagers muttered among themselves. "It's her demon father!" Edlin suddenly shouted, and brandished an ugly-looking ax. "I saw him teaching her to fly, and now the monster comes to claim his daughter. We have to kill them! Kill them both before they do the same to us!"

The crowd edged forward, brandishing iron pitchforks, hatchets, and knives — all weapons of earth that could cut him and Noira to ribbons. But Thelan wasn't afraid. An ugly anger rose in his chest instead. These were the people who had beaten his wife, tried to murder his daughter.

"Get back!" he thundered, and swept the crowd with a wind of hurricane force. Weapons flew from clenched fists as bodies tumbled and fell about the village square. Screaming in fear, the people tried to scramble to their feet in a suddenly desperate attempt to get away. Thelan caught sight of Edlin crawling toward shelter between two buildings. He shifted the air, sculpting it into a whirlwind that lifted the tavern keeper bodily off the ground and left him suspended in mid-air. The other villagers scattered the moment Thelan's wind let up, leaving him alone in the square with Noira and Edlin.

"Mercy," Edlin blubbered. "Have mercy!"

Thelan raised his hands and Edlin's voice thinned into a wail as he shot higher into the sky.

"You want mercy?" Thelan shouted, knowing the air would carry his voice to Edlin's ears. "What kind of mercy did you show Kolete and Noira? What kind of mercy would you have shown me? I'll show you that mercy, little man."

"Daddy?" came a small voice beside him. Thelan looked down into Noira's concerned face. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll let him fall," Thelan answered. "And he'll never hurt you or your mother again."

Noira nodded with satisfaction. "Good. He hurt Mommy. *Kill* him, Daddy, and make it hurt. He deserves it."

And Thelan paused. *You protect the child from danger,* Kolete had said, *and teach her what she needs to know.*

Was this what Noira needed to know? She would be a sorceress one day, a sorceress with greater power than his. What did she need to know about the use of power?

Thelan reached out to the wind again and the swirling air slowed. Edlin drifted gently downward. Ten feet above the ground, Thelan stopped the air dead still. With a squawk, Edlin fell straight into a reeking, wet pile of garbage. Whimpering, he got to his feet and scuttled into the gathering shadows.

Noira pouted. "Why didn't you kill him, Daddy?" she demanded. "Why?"

Thelan picked her up and held her close. "Because no one really deserves it, Noira. You didn't, and neither did Edlin. Not really. Now let's go check on your mother. I think we'll be moving to another village in the morning. One far away from here."

"Where, Daddy?" Noira asked, excited about the prospect.

"Wherever the wind takes us," Thelan replied, rising into the air. "Or maybe wherever your mother decides."

He twisted a cloud around them, and they were gone.

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Steven Piziks wrote this story after a clifftop walk.

Margaret Organ-Kean has drawn MAGIC cards and lives in Seattle.

OOPS

by Lorie Calkins

"Oops," said Wizard Othos, looking up from his notes at the end of the incantation.

His plump wife, Elna, who lived with him in the isolated cabin atop a high, secluded mountain, looked up from the bread dough she was kneading and asked, "What do you mean, 'Oops'? We're not going to have thousands of cats flying around the mountain again, are we? Or grasshoppers the size of wolves in the garden? Again. Or find the cabin's been transported to the moon or Mars again?" Her voice grew snippier and more shrill as she went on. Othos seemed to cringe shorter and deeper into himself with each word and each rise in pitch.

"No-no. Nothing like that," he said hurriedly, turning toward her to let her see how sincere he was. "I assure you, my dear, no such difficulties shall assail us this time." He paused to pursue the safest way to tell her, then hurried on, lest she become impatient with him. "I simply, well ... I may have used, ah, the wrong word, a single incorrect word, mind you, in my, uh, in this incantation." He looked at the floor. "That's all."

"The wrong word is all?" Elna repeated warily, not sure whether her husband of many, many years might be skating around the truth, as he often did under pressure.

"Um-hm," he nodded.

"Well, that shouldn't be so bad, then. You clean up that vile, stinking mess, then, while I go and pick some beans for your supper."

When she was gone and the cabin door shut, Othos grimaced. He hated beans. Ah, but Elna's bread was wonderful, and he could fill up on that. He patted his slight paunch, thinking about supper. "Stop growling," he said to it. "You'll get fed soon enough."

After a few moments' reflection on his latest spell, he shrugged his shoulders and began to straighten the messy work table.

"Othos! *Othos, You lazy husband!* Get *out* here! Othos? Where are you, you miserable, worthless, incompetent son-of-a-wizard?"

The wizard turned from his cleanup, glancing out toward the garden, but he couldn't see his wife there, though the bean vines grew not far from the nearest window, heavily laden with the prolific but unappetizing fruit. He sighed very heavily, feeling tremendously sorry for himself. "Oh, why should a Sagacious and Powerful Wizard such as I be burdened with so shrewish a wife!? I, who hold the power to rescue the entire world from its own folly by means of my mightiest Spell. Would that I had chosen better in my passionate youth!"

Then he noticed that Elna's voice sounded strange, too high-pitched, even for her. Othos decided it would be prudent to hurry to the garden, before the little woman became any angrier. He crossed the room, opened the cabin door, and stepped over the threshold, closing the door carefully behind him.

An odd feeling passed over him. He didn't have much time to question the tingly chill he felt. Out of the garden and straight across his path ran a large tortoiseshell cat. Very large. Oddly large for Sheldon, the wizard's cat, which the creature greatly resembled. And before it ran a rather large mouse. A rat, perhaps, though its shape evinced the more delicate startle of a field mouse than the shudder due a rat. And there, out in front of the mouse-rat, something else raced wildly.

What can that be, the wizard wondered idly, and where has Elna gotten to? He was too nearsighted to see more than a small, blurry, unsettlingly familiar shape. He fished in one copious pocket for his spectacles, and set them on his nose. They promptly fell off. He retrieved them and tried again, but they had grown much too large. At last he settled for holding them up with both hands and peering through them. It was too late. All he could see was the huge tortoise-shell-colored tail that flew around a corner of the garden, and disappeared between two rows of corn.

Othos started to run after them, but stepped on the front of his voluminous robe, and fell jarringly to the ground. "{}/\/\ /\{}+:::!" he said, cursing the ill-engendered garment and drawing the magical aura around him to give the curse reality. But just at that mo-

ment, he noticed that he felt a draft — all over.

In point of fact, he had been thrown completely out of the neck of the robe by the force of his fall, and that was actually a lucky thing, for, as he scrambled around to note, the robe had grown huge, bigger than huge, enormous, big enough to cover a house, perhaps. He might have smothered in its folds, had he not tripped.

It was at about that time that Wizard Othos finally noticed his environs — environs which he now seemed to see from a completely different perspective. That is, it dawned on him at last that everything around him had not grown larger. Instead, everything had remained the same, while he had grown very, very small.

The distant squeaking sound that he had earlier noticed and ignored had slowly grown into the recognizable screaming and ranting of his dear little wife, Elna. It suddenly became louder, and out of the nearest row of the garden popped Elna, naked as a newborn robin. And quite as tiny as Othos. Worse yet, she was still running, her plump legs pumping as fast as they could go, and her face nearly as red as a mother robin's belly. Othos took one look at what she ran from, and he began to run as well.

Up and down through the forest of gigantic vegetables they ran, closely followed by a huge field mouse, which was followed dangerously closely by a tortoise-shell cat out of a nightmare. The wizard and his wife gasped for breath, exhausted by the unfamiliar exertions, but unwilling to stop.

Poor Elna, Othos knew, was absolutely terrified of mice. They were the only thing, he observed somewhat ruefully, which did frighten her, at least at her previous size. The wizard knew that if they stopped running, the giant cat would probably recognize them only as prey. He didn't want to take that chance.

Abruptly, the mouse veered to the right, under a low-hanging tomato branch. The cat, unable to follow it by that path, pivoted and dashed around the plants to intercept its prey. Fortunately, Othos had enough wits remaining to dodge left, through the row of carrots, and behind a monstrous fan of carrot tops, pulling his poor, naked, red-faced wife with him.

They crawled beneath the hanging fronds of green and threw themselves on the bare dirt, breathing great gusts of air into their now-tiny lungs. When they finally found themselves able to sit up and think about their next move, it was obvious that they could not tarry in the garden.

"My dear, we must return to the cabin," the wise man said.

"Now there's a thought!" his wife snapped sarcastically. "Too bad *I* couldn't think of such clever plan! Now, Mr. Ingenious Mage, how do you propose that we accomplish it?"

"Why, we shall enter through the front door, of course!" he announced. But when they had made the long, arduous trek through the garden and across the open yard, they found the cabin door closed and latched securely, just as Othos had left it.

"You Stupid So-called Sorcerer! You didn't even leave the door open! How can we get in here? What a Moronic Mage." Elna, as usual, heaped on the insults, though Othos already felt miserable enough to cry. He wandered away from her, beginning to circle the towering cabin in search of an entrance.

Besides expecting to be safer inside from marauding mice, cats, and other dangers, Othos entertained a small hope that the inside of the cabin would

Artwork by Barb Armata

afford them another benefit. Long ago he had set spells on the cabin to protect it and everything inside it from the effects of any magical accidents. It was possible that, once he and Elna were back inside the cabin, they would be freed from the spell and returned to normal size.

"Aha!" cried Othos. "Elna! Elna, my dear, come hither, if you please."

"What is it, you old fool?" she said, trundling her nakedness around the side of the building, which now seemed to cover several acres of land. "It's growing chilly out here, and my bread dough has probably risen too much by now."

"Look up, my dear. Look up at your kitchen window!"

"Ah," she said, peering up, up, up the side of the colossal cabin, at the half-open window above them. "I opened that window. You see, old man, if I weren't here taking care of you, we'd never have found a way in!" Her triumphant glee was more than Othos could stand.

"And why did you open that window, I ask you? It was because of the stink of my magical ingredients! That open window is my doing, not yours!"

"All right then, Mister Brilliant Strategist," she answered, crossing her arms on her chest in challenge, "how do you propose that we get in that window that you so cleverly caused me to open?" She started to tap one bare toe against the ground, and swiftly changed her mind. Othos felt a pang of sympathy for her, despite his chagrin at her challenge. If her feet were even half as tender as his were from running barefoot through the now-gravel-sized dirt, they must be very sore indeed. His poor, sweet wife.

"Don't worry, Elna, my dear wife, I shall find a way!" With those noble words, the wizard sat down on the leaf of a plantain weed that happened to be handy, and began to ponder the situation. He pondered the problem for so long that Elna began to worry that he would get sunburned. She made the long walk back to the garden patch in search of large, soft leaves she could fashion into some sort of clothing for him.

Othos watched her walk away, knowing that he was thinking absurdly protective thoughts about her, instead of coming up with a brilliant solution to their predicament. Ah, he realized, she has remembered the beans. How unfortunate! At his size, which Othos guessed to be about four inches tall, each long, green string bean was taller than he was. Just one would make dozens of disagreeable meals for him.

Wishing that his wife's favorite vegetable could be carrots, or peas, or corn, Othos rolled his eyes miserably, and glanced up toward the open window. Inside, he knew, Elna's wonderful yeast bread lay, waiting only to be baked. His stomach growled again.

After a while, Elna returned, carrying a few large bean leaves. "It's such a shame!" she said, draping a leaf over Othos for a fitting. "The beans are already going to seed! This warm weather has made them grow too fast. We just aren't eating them quickly enough. Hold still, Othos. How can I keep you from a sunburn, if you won't sit still?"

He let her continue fiddling with the leaves, too discouraged even to argue with her.

"Othos, why don't you just magick us indoors?"

"I tried," he said miserably. "Nothing worked. I'm too small!"

"Meaning what?"

"My magic appears to be proportional to my size," he explained. "At this size, I can only draw a very small amount of magical energy about me, so I can only cast very small spells."

"Oh." She finished her alterations of the leaf garment, draped a couple of the leaves over herself, and sat down beside her husband on the plantain. There they remained for some time, keeping silent company. At last Elna ventured another question. "Could you grow a bean seed?"

Othos grimaced involuntarily. "What on Earth for!?" he demanded. "Haven't we already got enough of the nasty things?"

"Why, Othos! I never knew you disliked beans! Why have you never told me?"

"I, uh," he faltered, already sorry he had let it slip. "I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"But Othos, my dear husband! I've been growing and serving beans for years and years! Have you never liked them?"

"Never," he said, wondering that he could feel any more miserable than he had before. "I'm sorry."

"No, Othos, I'm sorry. I've been feeding you food you hate for most of our life together! And I didn't even realize it. What a wretched wife I've been!"

"Oh no, my dear Elna," the wizard said, putting his arm around her to draw her nearer. "You've been a wonderful wife. And a wonderful cook. Your yeast bread is so delicious that I lie awake at night thinking of how good a piece of it would taste. Look at this!" He patted the little belly that his flowing robe had once hidden. "Would I have this if I didn't like your cooking?" She smiled then, and he went on, "But if you didn't want it for the beans, why did you want me to grow a seed?"

"Oh," she said, shaking her head, suddenly shy of her husband of several decades. "It was a silly idea. It probably wouldn't work."

"Well, tell me anyway. I don't have any ideas at all. At least an idea that doesn't work would be a start."

"I just thought that, perhaps, if we were to plant a bean seed here, you know, one of those that has gotten too old and dried on the vine? I thought maybe we could climb the vine and get to the window that way."

"Let us try it at once!" The wizard jumped up excitedly, searching for something with which to dig a hole.

"Really? You think it might really work?"

"Why not? I don't know if I have enough magic to grow a seed that quickly, but if not, what have we lost? Yes, let's do it. Go and pick a seed." He chose a spot directly beneath the window and as close to the wall as he dared, and began to scrape at the packed earth. His hands quickly became scraped and raw, so he picked up a twig. It was now as large as a tree branch to him, and he used it as a pick, to loosen the soil. By the time Elna trudged wearily back to him, he had a hole that he judged to be, well, maybe, big enough.

The seed looked as big as a watermelon in her arms, and made a resounding thud when she dropped it into the hole. "I had trouble getting the dry pod open," she said, "But I couldn't carry the whole thing here."

"You did just fine," the Othos said, giving her a hug. Together they pushed the dirt back into the hole to cover the seed. Then they looked for some water. Without water, Othos had said, even magic wouldn't make the seed grow. At last they found Sheldon's water dish. It was a long walk back and forth, so they took turns carrying a few drops of

water at a time in their garment-leaves. Several trips later, Elna pronounced it wet enough, and Othos began his incantation.

"Don't change any of the words this time," his wife cautioned. Othos merely favored her with a glare, then a small smile of chagrin, and hurried on.

He finished chanting and weaving his hands in the arcane manner. They watched. And they waited. They sat down. They got up and paced. They sat down again, discouraged.

Something rumbled. The ground shook. The moist earth over the seed of their hopes cracked. A leaf popped through the ground. Then another one rose up. And the beanstalk took off as only a magically-enhanced beanstalk can do. It grew wildly before their unbelieving eyes.

"Hm," said the wizard.

"What?" asked his wife. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing really. It's just that we could have saved ourselves the climb, if we had thought to grab the stalk as it grew."

In just a few minutes, the string bean plant had grown to maturity, its tendrils clinging to the rough cabin wall. It flowered, set fruit, and grew beans. "Well, I guess we will just have to climb it," the old woman said, grasping the thick trunk, and beginning to shinny up it. The wizard could hardly allow himself to be shown up by an old woman, so he started to scale it, too.

In spite of the hot sun and the long time it took them to make the ascent, they tore away the leaf clothing early in the climb. It interfered with the work.

"I made it!" Elna shouted triumphantly, after she had let go of the stalk and pulled herself across the windowsill. "We're finally here!" Othos could hear the exhaustion in her voice. Nevertheless she reached out to help pull

Artwork by Barb Armata

him onto the safety of the ledge.

"Thank you, my dear." He hugged her tightly. "What would I ever do without you?" And he really meant it, he thought with surprise. He had chosen the best wife for himself after all.

Othos and Elna both felt the tingling chill then. Both guessed what it might mean. And both hoped desperately that it meant what they thought. They jumped from the window sill to the dishcloth. It was uncomfortably wet, but soft enough to ease their landing. They ran to the edge of the counter and waited.

Evening had arrived by the time they spoke again of the day's events. They had baked and eaten Elna's wonderful bread, along with some leftover soup and two pots of strong tea. They had dressed in old, soft clothing that didn't chafe their sunburned skin very much, and they were sitting in their comfortable chairs, Elna stroking the fluffy tortoiseshell cat in her lap, and Othos thoughtfully chewing the mouthpiece of his cold briar pipe. (He was trying to quit.)

"Othos." Elna finally brought up the concern that had been nagging at her. "How are we going to survive, if we can't go outdoors to get food?"

"I've been wondering that, too, my dear. I suppose I will just have to reverse the spell."

"What spell? The one you were working on earlier today?"

"Yes. That's the one."

"Isn't that the one in which you used the wrong word?"

"Yes, I believe I must have used an incorrect word in the spell, and that, you see, is the difficult part of reversing it."

"What was that spell for, anyway, dear husband?"

"Oh, it was to save the world," he said casually.

"What?" She turned to him then, not sure she had heard right. The cat, too, gave a disbelieving trill.

"Just as I said. I wanted to save the world from its own folly. You see, the planet is becoming too crowded. We are not affected 'way up here, but the population of the rest of the Earth is growing at fantastic rates. Soon, there may not be food enough for all the people. So I made a spell to reduce the number of humans conceived each year. It was truly a brilliant bit of sorcery. Alas, rather than entreating the Good and Great Powers, as I intended, to 'limit the population growth,' or was it 'reduce the human population,' I believe I ... " he faltered, embarrassed by his small slip of the tongue earlier in the day.

"Yes. Go on. What did you ask for?"

"I may have, that is, I think I cast a spell requesting that the Powers `shrink the human population of the Earth.'"

❄

Lorie Calkins has done everything from motorcycle repair to pumping gas to raising livestock (among which she includes her four children). She says that her husband and kids are almost as thrilled as she is at her first sale to a major magazine and are very supportive of her writing — a vital asset when writing at home!

Barb Armata is active in several areas of art, doing commercial signs and ads, comics, illustration, and paintings. Her depictions of "the odd, the alien, and the everyday" can be seen at sf art shows such as Boskone, and she has regularly contributed illos to ***MZBFM***.

Clarion

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SPARROW'S SONG

by Huan-Hua Chye

I think I am lonely. I think that is what the matter with me is. "Witchy woman," they call me here, in the barbarian eastlands to which I have come, and they exalt me for the mark of the phoenix which I bear. Nobody comes close to me, though this clan has adopted me.

Was it only a month ago that I broke the eastern borders of my native land, the land of the phoenix? It must be, for the moon was full that day, and it is again tonight. It seems so much longer.

There is a rapping on the ground outside my tent. "Come in," I say, and a woman enters.

She wants something to cure her husband of the blood-fever. I tell her to use broad-leafed wort to cure it, and miniony to keep him from vomiting up the medicine. She bows silently and hands me a parcel of rabbit skins as she exits hurriedly.

They are frightened of that knowledge, the healer's knowledge of herbs and plants that I bear from the west. But I know that is not all. I am marked.

After my parents died — they were killed in the war between the east and the west, such a long time ago — I was fostered by my uncle Wulfram. He was mad, touched in the head. He was obsessed with capturing the phoenix for a drop of its blood, which, so the western lore goes, would make him immortal.

I had not ever really believed it — had never really believed in the existence of the firebird — but I saw it flying, and touched that burning golden blood when I killed the phoenix at his bidding; and when I touched it, I wiped my hand clean in my black hair. Now, where the blood marked the center of my upper forehead and five finger-furrows down my scalp, golden, fire-bright feathers grow.

And it is that which brands me as a wisewoman, a spirit girl who needs no love. I suppose it is the way of all people to find the differences instead of the similarities, to set others apart for whatever reason they can find. How much difference do phoenix feathers make?

There is a rustle outside my tent flap. I rise and open it. Outside is a man — no, a youth, his beard barely sprung on his cheeks. He is at least my age, possibly older. His blue eyes — so pale in comparison to the dark ones of the westerners — are startled.

"Oh, *kal'et*," he says, naming me a witch or a seer in the tongue of the easterners. "I-I have brought you offering, that you might help me with my problem." His hopeful, bright eyes meet mine.

"Thank you," I say, "but I am no *kal'et*. I doubt that I could help you with any problem."

"Oh, but, *kal'et* ..." he stammers in his strongly eastern-accented voice.

I cannot stand it any longer. Had I been at home, and had this boy been a westerner, he would not have come and fawned at my feet, would not have acted as eager to please as a dog. "My name is Jenry," I snap. "And I'm no *kal'et*, I told you."

"Jenry ... could you not at least hear me out, *ka* — Jenry?"

I smile at him. In this flat eastern land, where I am as alone as the wind on the plains, he is the first to call me by name. "Come in ... ?"

"Sparrow," he supplies, and, at my shocked expression, explains, "That is my problem."

Sparrow: a child-name. In this clan, all children are given a silly nickname, and after completing their rite of passage, they are named as an adult. Sparrow seats himself across from me when I sit down in front of my little oil lamp. His angular face is lit from underneath, giving him a hollowed, ghostly look.

"*Ka* — I mean, Jenry, the rite of passage for men is to go out on the tundra and kill one of the *triim*-beasts. It must be dead by one's own hand, and not a drowning or one who froze to death. I — I went out on the tundra, but I saw none of the *triim* there for the whole tenday allotted me. I failed." He casts down his eyes, shamed. I am embarrassed by being treated as if I were a priest who could purge him of sin.

"That is a hard test," I agree, feeling foolish. Yet it is; the *triim* are like the swift foxes in my woodland home, only white as the flat, frozen land called the tundra. The tundra, far to the north, toward the fixed star.

"What should I do, Jenry?" he asks me. I am at a loss.

"Try it again?" I suggest feebly. "I do

Artwork by Dale Enzenbacher

not know."

"*Kal'et*," says Sparrow, "here is the offering I have brought you. Perhaps it will help you remember your days in the western forest, and what they taught you there." He unwraps the hide bundle he brought with him. "I have heard that you were — *are* an archer."

Inside are fourteen arrows, each one shining in the yellow lamplight. I lift one up and examine it. It is far finer than my old arrows: a razor-edged steel arrowhead, polished till it shines like a mirror, is mounted upon a straight, smooth shaft almost as long as my arm. The fletching is even, of brown-mottled and white ptarmigan feathers. "Thank you," I breathe. I glance over at my unstrung compound bow, leaning against the tent wall, and my quiver, long empty of arrows; the shafts were weak through the grain, and splintered when I tried to pull them free of prey's bodies.

"Can it help, Jenry?" asks Sparrow.

I finger one of the arrowheads. And suddenly a vision flashes into my mind, one spangled and golden, as if borne by a phoenix-bird.

The tundra: it is white, white, and gray as far as the eye can see. Sparrow: he is tall, straight-shouldered, carrying a bow. And he is singing into the wind. The triim*: it is coming, and it suddenly has an arrow fletched in gold coming from its breast, as if it were some intimate part of its body, an extra limb perhaps, another head. Sparrow: he is back at the clan's firepit, and they are giving him a name.*

"What is it, *kal'et*?" Sparrow asks. Stunned, I look away; I cannot deny the name now.

"I saw you," I begin, "out on the tundra ...."

Sparrow is ready to go out on the tundra at last. He wears a parka trimmed in white rabbit-fur, and he carries a bow that belongs to me. I do not mind him taking it. He also carries a quiver on his shoulder, one with fourteen arrows within: thirteen are steel-tipped, fletched with ptarmigan feathers; the last is of white wood, and it is fletched with four golden feathers. I pulled them from my own brow, and they burn with phoenix fire. The wood, Sparrow and I hunted for on the wide plain, finally finding the whitethorn that I wanted.

Whitethorn has power, as do firebird feathers. That arrow will not miss; but the *triim* is a totem, one of those wise

Artwork by Dale Enzenbacher

Artwork by Dale Enzenbacher

beasts who sang at the making of the worlds, and it knows of the properties of that arrow. It will not come to Sparrow willingly. He needs a song, a song which I heard distantly in my vision.

"What were its words?" Sparrow asked me.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I imagine, though, that they would have to be words of love, words of power. The totem animals will not come to a song of hate." I was amazed at the distance of my voice, how different it seemed from before I gained the feathers of the phoenix.

"Then I will think of it during the journey," Sparrow told me. "Thank you, Jenry." I am glad that he did not use the term *kal'et*, however appropriate it might be.

But now he is setting off into the north wind and I shall not see him for a long twelve days. It is a day's journey between here and the tundra.

"*Kal'et*," says someone, and, turning, I see that it is Sparrow's mother Andra: her hair is as black as his and her eyes are as blue. "I hope you can help him, Jenry." Sparrow must have told her my name. Her eyes are moist and earnest. The wind blows through the feathers in my hair, and sings faintly.

"I hope I can," I agree, and, my feathers whistling a possible tune in the wind, I hug her, thankful that she used my *name*. We are friends, sharing the hope that Sparrow succeeds. Surprised, she almost steps back, but then returns the embrace.

"You do not burn like fire, like the phoenix," Andra murmurs to me. "The tales they tell are wrong." She steps back. "Thank you, Jenry. I — I hope you are not too lonely here."

It is enough. "No, I'm not," I tell her, and watch Sparrow's back disappearing in the grass.

That night, I touch the single arrow I kept. I see Sparrow at the edge of the tundra.

Sparrow: he is cold, his cheeks red as woodland apples from the beating of the wind, his body hunched into his parka. The bow is still on his shoulder. The tundra: it is empty, vast, flickering blue and violet lights gleaming nacreous in its black sky.

I hope he will be all right. I put down the arrow and climb into my sleeping furs. I will see how he is doing tomorrow.

The sun is rising. I stretch out one arm and touch the arrow. My *kal'et* gifts still amaze me, ringed as they are in phoenix feathers. I see a golden-lined vision beginning to form. *Sparrow: he has risen with the sun, as I have. He is standing alone on the tundra, and he is stringing the bow. He is beginning to sing. The song: it is bright, and hums through the cold thin air of the ice-plain like a golden-fletched arrow. But it is not enough. The* triim*: it hides in its hole, laughing at the mortal's calling. It is a totem, old as the land, and it will not come to him.*

Sparrow's song is not enough. I answer questions through the day, feeling that as I talk to these folk I alienate them with my power. Do they understand at all why Sparrow returned to the tundra? Andra comes and talks to me, and she is the only one who does not see me as a monster.

Sparrow: he is discouraged, as I was when I hunted the phoenix, finding not

spoor, nor trail, nor lair. He is shooting a tundra lemming for food, having found no larger prey. I see him wrenching free the steel-tipped arrow from the lemming's carcass. The triim*: it is irritated, the mortal having left off its sport. It runs out of its burrow, a flash of mocking white in the boy's eye, but as the mortal lifts the golden-feathered arrow from the quiver, the* triim *is gone.*

I feel Sparrow's frustration, his desperation. I am watching when he puts his face in his hands and weeps, out of the sight of anything — almost. Nothing is there on the tundra. But when I, feeling ashamed for watching a private moment, withdraw my hand from the arrow, his image lingers in my mind. "Sparrow?" I say, surprised, and I see his head jerk up. The *triim* is startled as well, and it allows Sparrow to see it for a moment, and then it is gone.

Five days have passed, with Sparrow making no significant headway. I see him there, on the tundra, at all times, and I do not know why. I do not feel that I can tell Andra. I watch Sparrow singing of his love for his mother, his father, his sisters, his brothers, all his kin; I watch him sing of his love for hunting in the wild, grassy plains, his love for his clan, his love for anything, everything. I am always there, hearing his song. I wonder if he sees me as well, a girl with golden feathers running through her black braid and hints of brilliant gold in her dark *kal'et* eyes. Perhaps he does. I finger the arrow, its sharp edge, and wonder if I have given him hope after all, if I am anything more to him than a figurehead, a symbol of the victory he is striving for.

"Oh!" I cry, involuntarily, as I slice my finger on the arrowhead. I see Sparrow glance around wildly, as he had before. "Sparrow, do you hear me? Do you see me?" I wince at the desperate loneliness in my voice, but Sparrow gives no sign of having heard this time. His gaze is fixed into the sky and the amber-lit clouds. I drop the arrow, sighing. But as my fingers leave its wood, I think I hear a faint reply — faint as windblown birdsong. But Sparrow has turned away and I cannot see his face.

It is the seventh day. Sparrow looks haggard, depressed. But he goes out to the tundra, and prepares to sing. I see him, feel his surprise; he has sung of all the loves he can think of. There is no song left that might attract the *triim*. He sinks down in despair, and I feel his thoughts of suicide, of freedom from this shame.

Artwork by Dale Enzenbacher

"No!" I cry aloud, startling Andra, who is telling me of something.

And in my mind's eye, I see Sparrow, standing straight as a birch, holding his knife in his hands as if it were some dangerous beast, or as if it were the thing that had spoken to him. "There is one song left," he whispers.

Sparrow: he is beginning to sing. He is singing — The triim*: it is entranced, drawn in by a song of a witchy woman, a* kal'et*, who killed the phoenix and was marked by its blood in a ripple of burning amber. It hears a true note in the mortal's voice, a note of love for this woman who haunts his mind and his dreams. It is creeping forth, and it has appeared, snowy white, a blaze of pure snow beneath the aurora borealis. It is coming to Sparrow, drawn by his song. The arrow: it is singing through the air, wind on gold, and it is tasting the sweet salt song of* triim*'s heartblood on its razor edge. Death: it is reaching for the soul of a* triim.

"What is the matter, Jenry?" asks Andra. But I think she heard Sparrow's song, for she is smiling. And I am smiling as well.

Two days later, I see Sparrow, just as he was in my vision: beaming, glowing with the strength and drunken vigor of fresh air and youth. He is wearing a pure white cape of *triim*'s fur. The fire is roaring and popping, sparks flying heavenward, and the dancers whirl around it. A man, once a boy named Sparrow, calls me, Jenry, into the dance, and, as I feel his warm lips on mine, his arms around me, the soft *triim*'s fur of his cloak under my fingers, I know that I will not have to be lonely here anymore. Marolen — that means something like "twice on the tundra," in the old eastern tongue. He is whirling me around, and around, to the beat of the drums and the chant of the singers, and I feel giddy; they are all singing Sparrow's song. Andra and I, we were not the only ones who heard it.

❄

Huan-hua Chye astounded us all by noting in her bio that our acceptance letter was an early 15th birthday present. (Here is the proof of what we noted in last issue's letters column: if you can *write*, no one cares how old you are.) She is a student at Homestead High School in Cupertino, California. "Sparrow's Song" is her first professional sale but it certainly won't be her last (especially considering that we have already bought two more stories from her). She has previously had work appear in venues such as *Cricket*.

Dale Enzenbacher has primarily been known for his metal sculpture and jewelry. He believes that art is a powerful weapon for social change and has tried to use his "to inspire people with no hope...to follow their dreams."

An Interview with
Lisa Goldstein
by David G. Hartwell

Lisa Goldstein's first novel, **THE RED MAGICIAN**, was about surviving in Europe under the Nazis. It won the American Book Award for best paperback. Her two most recent novels are **SUMMER KING, WINTER FOOL**, a fantasy of an imaginary land, and **STRANGE DEVICES OF THE SUN AND MOON**, set in Elizabethan England. She was a co-founder of Dark Carnival, a specialty sf and fantasy bookstore in Berkeley. In early 1995, David G. Hartwell, now an editor at Tor Books, and Rachel Holmen, Publisher at ***MZBFM***, interviewed this talented, reclusive fantasy author. Kathryn Cramer, Hartwell's co-editor for **THE ASCENT OF WONDER**, was also present.

d: I remember when you came to New York for the American Book Award and we all went off and had drinks at the top of the World Trade Center and you said, "I like this; I could like this. This is okay."

l: My fifteen minutes of fame.

d: Lisa, how did you decide to be a writer?

l: I always wanted to be a writer, ever since I started reading.

d: Really! So you wanted to be a writer when you were, say, twelve?

l: No, I was more like five.

r: When did you actually start writing stuff? That you can remember as being fiction?

l: I wrote some short stories when I was about twelve. They're gone.

r: Did you try to get them published?

l: No.

*d: Well, you didn't actually start publishing short stories until after you published **THE RED MAGICIAN**. How come?*

l: Because nobody would buy them before I published **THE RED MAGICIAN**.

d: So you were actually sending them out?

l: Yes!

d: Under pseudonyms?

l: Once. I got handwritten rejection notices for them. But they just weren't very good.

k: At least you didn't get rejections in crayon.

(laughter)

l: There was a summer between — I think '75 - where I just stayed home and wrote. Just wrote short stories and sent them out. I'll tell you what I learned then.

Photo by Rachel Holmen

d: What?

l: I learned how to stay home and write, which was a really hard thing for me to learn. People kept calling and saying, "Oh, let's go out and go to the beach."

d: Yes, you're right. It is an important thing.

l: It is. Good discipline.

k: Guy Kay says that's why he likes to write in foreign countries, so no one can invite him out to lunch.

l: Well, I would have loved to write in foreign countries. Nobody was paying my way.

r: What's your life like, as a writer?

l: It's a lot harder than I thought it would be.

d: Than you thought it would be when you were a kid or a lot harder than you thought it would be when you were in the bookstore?

l: Both. All of them. It's very very difficult to make a living doing it. But I love it. I love doing it. The thing that people hear about most of the time is the huge advances that people get. That's what gets a lot of attention. My mother would send me clippings of what people got.

r: How sweet.

l: Yes, I know.

(laughter)

l: She meant well, I think. She wanted me to get that much. But you don't hear what *most* people get, which isn't a lot.

d: Who's in your writers' workshop?

l: Just a bunch of people — Jonathan Lethem, Martha Soukup, David Cleary, Ray Davis, and Avon Swofford. It's a fun group, actually. We go to movies.

d: (laughter) A writers' workshop that goes to movies?

l: Yes, we do critiques, but we tend to have a couple hours of just sitting around talking first — which I found out is not the way most workshops work. They call it to order, and they have rules...

d: Well, when did you start reading fantasy and science fiction?

l: When ***Star Trek*** was around. (laughter)

d: Okay, all right. Did you read fantasy before that? Like fairy tales, that sort of thing?

l: I read **A WRINKLE IN TIME**. Right around when ***Star Trek*** came out I read **LORD OF THE RINGS**, which I really liked.

*d: What started you reading was **LORD OF THE RINGS**?*

l: Well, it really started when ***Star Trek*** was cancelled. And then I thought, I wonder if there's any more of this stuff?

*d: I see. And you found **LORD OF THE RINGS**?*

l: Yes. That was very popular in my junior high school.

*k: I remember my grandfather lying on the sofa reading **LORD OF THE RINGS**.*

d: It was a respectable book. W.H. Auden had reviewed it in the

New York Times. *It came out in paperback first in 1964.*

l: This is probably four years later. Someone gave a book report on it and gave away the ending. I read it anyway; I loved it anyway. I knew what was going to happen at the end.

d: So suspense isn't everything. Well, who were your favorite science fiction writers when you were a young enthusiast?

l: You mean back after ***Star Trek*** was cancelled?

d: Yes.

l: I was really into Arthur C. Clarke, and Poul Anderson. I know I just read everybody. Later on when **DANGEROUS VISIONS** came out, then, *that* was really impressive. When I was in high school, I got sent to detention for reading in class, and got to stay in this detention room for three days and they had a stack of ***Analog***s there. Is this punishment? (laughter)

d: Lisa, where did you go to college?

l: UCLA.

d: What was your English degree "in"? Just general literature?

l: It was just a B.A. I didn't go on.

d: Take any interesting courses?

l: Actually UCLA was very good for folklore and mythology. I took every folklore and mythology class. That helped me a lot in later life. You wouldn't think so, but it did.

d: Did Sturgeon teach you at UCLA?

l: He had an extension class that I took, a night class, in 1972 or '73. Octavia Butler was in it. She'd already gone to Clarion. Halfway through the class she sold her first novel. I just wanted to take a class with Theodore Sturgeon.

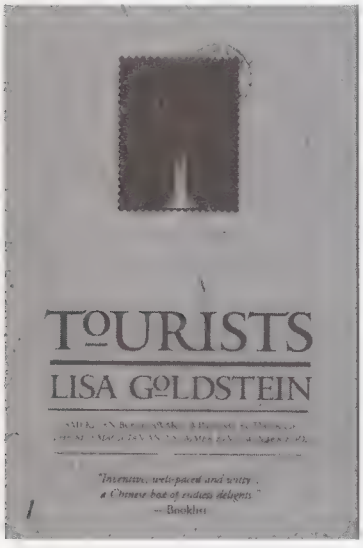
d: Had you ever read anything by him at that point?

l: Well, yes. Do I sound so...innocent? Yes, of course.

d: Well, Karen Joy Fowler's introduction to science fiction was a class with H. Bruce Franklin at Stanford. That was '70 or '71, a famous time for people getting into science fiction through classes of various sorts. It didn't happen before that.

l: I took a class with Harlan Ellison, too, before that. I wasn't officially enrolled — a friend of mine was going to Immaculate Heart College. The students were allowed to choose their own classes, so we got together and we said, "We want Harlan Ellison to teach us to write science fiction." So we all went over to Harlan's house and I showed up too. I didn't realize how pushy it was then so I just showed up. He didn't seem to mind.

d: I see. Well, what did you learn from Harlan?



l: There were a lot of things that he taught. He was actually pretty good. Ed Bryant was his TA. Harlan taught all the basics of plot, character, consistency. He was pretty hard on the writers.

d: Were you writing?

l: I turned in a few stories.

d: Where are they now?

l: In the garbage. They were pretty bad. He said, "Write about the worst thing that ever happened to you." And I thought, "Okay, I'm nineteen; nothing bad has happened to any of us." I wrote about my boyfriend who was number five in the draft lottery. That was the worst thing that had happened to me. And Harlan didn't like that story. So I wrote the second story. I made it funny, because I didn't think he could hate it as much if it was funny.

d: I see.

l: And he didn't. He sort of liked it, and the class liked it. He had problems with it.

d: Okay, so you signed up for a class with Sturgeon. And what do you think you learned from Sturgeon?

l: This is going to sound terrible, but he wasn't a very good teacher. It was a fun class. We just sat around and he told stories and told jokes and puns and talked about our favorite children's books.

d: Did he ever even refer to writing metric dialog?

l: Yes, well the point of the class was that he had this new exciting way of writing and this was it.

d: You think it didn't make any impression?

l: I tried it once in a story, and it worked really well. All right, so okay, it made an impression. It worked well.

d: But it didn't feel like what you wanted to do with stories. Did you write anything in Sturgeon's course?

l: I did, but I didn't turn anything in, because you had to read it out loud, and I was just too scared to do that. Fortunately I wasn't taking the course for credit.

d: I see, okay. How did you get into book dealing?

l: I graduated; I couldn't find anything to do with my English degree. I was trying to get a job proofreading or copy editing and I got a job at College Book Company in LA. And then Jack Rems and I decided to start a bookstore in Berkeley.

d: Okay. Didn't Jack work for Sherry Gottlieb at A Change of Hobbit for a period of time? Was that during college?

l: Yes.

d: I see. So how long after graduation did you start the book store?

l: About a year after. This was '76, and I graduated in '75. I was looking for a job, working in bookstores, and writing. I wasn't cut out to be a bookseller, because I have very serious opinions about books. And some very bad fantasy books came out around then that I hated, and yet they sold like crazy. It was a real conflict. I couldn't say, "Don't buy these books." But it's very difficult.

d: And you wanted to sell good books.

l: Yes. I kept recommending good books — **THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS** [by Gene Wolfe] was one of my favorite books around that time — and people would come back and say, "I didn't get it."

d: Well, that teaches you something about reading. But you thought that you weren't cut out for bookselling because there were things that you didn't like selling and things that you did like, which were not selling.

l: I actually like bookselling. At my own bookstore it was just too frustrating. If I'm selling books for someone else, I can handle it, if that makes any sense at all. When I worked at Books, Inc., that was not a science fiction bookstore. It was a wider field; that was more interesting.

d: How many bookstores did you work for?

l: Four.

d: College Book Company, Dark Carnival, Books Inc....

l: And then Cody's.

d: When you came up here [to Berkeley] and you founded a bookstore, you walked into the largest and most active fantasy and science fiction community in the nation.

l: Well, I didn't know that. I wasn't really part of that.

d: Well, I understand that you feel that you were not a part of it, but you were physically present at the events. At all of the big conventions, you were there. At the parties at Charlie Brown's house; you were there at the ABA.

l: I was in several writing workshops during that time. But it was a bad time for me personally, and in '82 I sold my half of the bookstore.

d: However, you know, you did learn a lot about bookselling in the book business. And you did read a lot.

l: Yes, that's true.

d: But I know that in 1979 when ***THE RED MAGICIAN*** *came to Pocket Books in manuscript, it was Ellen Kushner who told me that you had written* ***THE RED MAGICIAN*** *and that we ought to look at it. And I said, "Lisa's written a novel?" And Ellen said, "Yes, yes. Lisa writes." I said, "She's been writing all this time and never told me!"*

l: Well, that's what everybody said. Terry Carr said that to me too. I sent a short story to him under a pseudonym. I told him, a year before he died.

d: Well, my impression at the time was that you had thought of it originally as a young adult novel. You had done more than one draft of it because you had changed the central character's name from "my mother" to Kicsi.

l: Yes. It was far too autobiographical at first. It didn't work.

d: But the book did work.

l: Well, I think so.

d: No, I mean that I'm pleased and proud to have acquired and published the book. Twice. And maybe we can keep it in print this time, but if not I'll just acquire it the next time. I think it's at least a minor classic of contemporary fantastic literature.

l: Somebody's optioned it for a movie, in Toronto. I'm only getting Toronto money, not Hollywood money. But it's cool.

d: Why did you write this particular book? Autobiography?

l: Well, partly that, and partly that I'd started a dopey Celtic fantasy and then three chapters into it I thought, "Why am I writing this? This isn't my background. I should write something with my background — an Eastern European Jewish fantasy." And so I just started it. It started as a short story. Someone told me to make it into a novel, so I did.

d: But if you didn't tell anybody you were writing it, who told you to turn it into a novel?

l: Jack.

d: Jack was right.

l: Yes, he was. So since then I've let him read all my books. I don't know if that was just a lucky guess, or if he's incredibly astute about these things.

d: Was Jack the only one who knew you were writing?

l: I think so. Ellen Kushner knew it because I mentioned the book during a conversation about a children's fantasy novelist — nobody's ever heard of this woman — Margot Benary-Isbert, who wrote **THE WICKED ENCHANTMENT**, who had just died. So I wasn't really keeping it a secret. But I got the impression nobody wanted to hear from an unpublished writer.

d: I see. That may have been a facet of the Bay Area at that time being the biggest, most aggressive, most competitive science fiction and fantasy community in the U.S. There were something like seventy-five published writers in the area at that time. It was the single biggest concentration in the U.S. Of all generations.

It was a good time, from the launch of Laser Books, which was announced at Westercon in Oakland, until the market crashed in 1980... Everybody who had a first novel sold their first novel. Basically publishers expanded.

l: There was all this new fantasy. Publishers hadn't thought there was a market for it, I guess. It was just Tolkien for a while.

d: Did you think of yourself as a science fiction writer who wrote fantasy, or a fantasy and science fiction writer?

l: I guess a fantasy and science fiction writer. Now I think of myself as a fantasy writer.

d: Okay. Why? What's the change?

l: I'm more interested in fantasy — in writing it. I like reading science fiction, but I'm not interested in writing it, so much.

d: I know that by the late '70s your friend Jack was coming up to me and saying, "You know, you really ought to put Lisa on the judges of the World Fantasy Award one of these years, 'cause she really reads a lot of fantasy and she really knows a lot of fantasy, and she likes fantasy."

l: That's true.

*d: And I said, "Oh, okay." So one of the people who knew you best at the time, Jack, had pegged you as a fantasy expert. So in a ten-year period you had moved from being post-***Star Trek***, fascinated with Anderson and Clarke and that sort of thing — although having read Tolkien and having it make an impression — and somehow had evolved into somebody who was very knowledgeable about fantasy.*

l: Well, I was just reading everything. I mean, there wasn't a lot of fantasy in the mid '60s or late '60s.

d: No, there wasn't. There's been a lot of evolution and development in the fantasy field over the last fifteen years. As you say, in the early '70s there just wasn't enough of it for there to be a field.

l: Everybody said, "If you like Tolkien, read C.S. Lewis." So I read C.S. Lewis and hated him. The "Earthsea" trilogy was really good. And then when we had the bookstore, I noticed that Pat McKillip's [hardcover] books would sell incredibly well. We'd put one on the shelf and it would sell. And then we'd put another one out and it would sell. And we kept putting them on the shelf, and I thought, "What's this?"

d: So you read it.

l: So I read that. I really liked that. We were trying to think of where that would sell [to a publisher] in paperback and we just couldn't. I mean, it was really weird to think of today, but there just wasn't a market for it.

d: Are you talking about ***THE FORGOTTEN BEASTS OF ELD****?*

l: The trilogy. **THE RIDDLE MASTER**. And then of course Del Rey bought it and made millions out of it. So what did we know?

d: Yes. I remember. Did you ever read, earlier, the Ballantine Adult Fantasy?

l: Yes; I collected them. I still have them.

d: Read much Moorcock?

l: Yes. I'm trying to visualize my shelves. Peter Beagle,

THE LAST UNICORN. Marion Zimmer Bradley, **THE MISTS OF AVALON**. Evangeline Walton. In the early '80s, I really liked **LITTLE BIG**. And I tried to write like that. I just got obsessed by it and I tried to write a novel like it about five times. You may have gotten some of these; I don't know. They weren't very good.

d: I got one of them. And I took you out to a publishing lunch at Worldcon, in Chicago, and I said, "Lisa, tell me about tell me about your attitude towards this book. Because, basically, I don't think it's working — because I don't think you want to write this book."

l: I remember that.

d: And at the end of lunch you said, "You must be correct, because I feel so relieved. I don't have to write this book." And it took you, what, four years to write your second book?

l: Yes. Actually **THE DREAM YEARS** was already started by the time I heard about the American Book Award. But it was just very hard to start a second book, I guess because the first book was so important. It was about things that were so important to me. And it was hard finding something else that was that important, that I really, *really* wanted to write about.

d: Why did you want to write about the French Surrealists?

l: Because I just became fascinated with them. I can't even remember why; I just read something about them.

d: Did you read Roger Shattuck?

l: Later, yes. I read about this guy who would go into parties and say, "Okay, everybody switch drinks" — wonderful — and so I tried to find everything I could about them.

d: How come this *made a book, and not something else?*

l: Because I was just so fascinated by them. The same thing happened with the Elizabethans. I would get into research, I would read everything I could on this period, then all of a sudden realized, oh, I'm going to do a novel about it — and have to re-read everything for research.

*d: I see. Well for **STRANGE DEVICES**, for instance, I know you did this enormous research. Where did you find out about woman book dealers in London?*

l: There was a book, **THE STATIONER'S REGISTER**, on who was selling books in Elizabethan London, and there actually was a woman selling books. I just wondered how she managed. She would have been the only one, because her husband had died and was a bookseller. And that's what started the book, really.

*d: Uh huh. So it started with **THE STATIONER'S REGISTER**?*

l: No, I was doing research on everything. Not research; I was just reading about things. And then I came across a reference to her. And I was really fascinated by it. So then I checked out **THE STATIONER'S REGISTER**, which was in the rare book library at U.C. Berkeley.

d: I see. My recollection of the thing is that all throughout the writing of the book, you and I were discussing your research.

l: I was feeling shaky about my research, because I wasn't an academic, and because I'd done it all on my own. But I really do think I did a good job.

d: Yes. Quite honestly, I **am**; *I* **have** *the academic credentials, and I looked over the book and I thought you'd done a good job. Scholarship is scholarship.*

l: Yes, that's how I feel. I've known people who don't have degrees who seem to be smarter than people who have degrees, because they keep learning. They don't think they're finished.

d: Right, yes. I know John Ford doesn't have a Ph.D., but he certainly has as much knowledge in a number of fields as a number of Ph.D's I do know.

l: He got a quote from Marlowe wrong.

d: He did?

l: Yes, he did.

d: Aargh.

l: Didn't I tell you this? Oh, in **SCHOLARS OF NIGHT** he attributes a quote to ***DOCTOR FAUSTUS*** and it was from ***EDWARD II***.

d: Well, gee, I hope he did it on purpose.

l: No.

d: Yes. Okay, well, let's talk about other fantasy writers that are writing right now. Who do you like?

l: Ellen Kushner, Tim Powers, Lucius Shepard, Mikey, of course [Michaela Roessner], Geoff Ryman, Greer Gilman (author of **MOONWISE**), Nancy Kress, Peter Beagle, Alan Garner. Guy Gavriel Kay, Carol Emshwiller, Salman Rushdie. I've read a lot of trashy mysteries lately. I went on a big binge of reading Elizabethan stuff — very serious literary criticism, and also Shakespeare and Webster and those people. I read all of Shakespeare. It took me two years. I read the **KING JAMES BIBLE**, which took me even longer. It was something I picked up when I didn't have anything else to read. It was very interesting!

d: (laughter) Yes, it is very interesting, in fact. It's the primary influence on prose style in the English language for the last four hundred years.

l: Yes, yes! And the interesting thing is that Shakespeare sounds so much like it that he's got this authority that he shouldn't have. This is my theory. People quote him as they quote the Bible. In fact, I've heard people quote Shakespeare and believe they *were* quoting the Bible. I'm influenced by my brother, who thinks Shakespeare's overrated. He is overrated, in the sense that no one seems to think he ever did anything wrong. But I don't think he's *that* overrated. I do admire Shakespeare.

d: Well, which of the other dramatists do you really like?

l: Marlowe. I read Webster, liked him. I read some of Jonson, not everything. And Thomas Nashe. He was funny, most of the time. Thomas Kyd. He didn't write much, so that was easy.

*d: Normally you get fascinated by research or an area or something like that. What happened with **TOURISTS**?*

l: I got interested in travel, and the feeling of being an American tourist...feeling alienated... I was still under the influence of magic realists, but coming out of it. That was my magic realist book.

d: Which magic realists did you feel you were most under the influence of?

l: Well, Marquez. I think John Crowley is a magic realist.

Those two.

d: Anybody else in particular?

l: I don't know if you heard of it, there's a book **ILLYWHACKER** by Peter Carey. And James Blaylock. I really liked that book. I was up against it for the World Fantasy Award and hoped I'd lose to it — if I had to lose.

*d: How do you feel at this point about the revision of **TOURISTS**?*

l: Well it's good. Really good. The ending needed work.

k: I gave you a very hard time about that in the **Washington Post**, *I remember.*

(laughter)

l: A lot of people said that about the ending. ***The New Yorker*** said that after this otherwise glowing review.

*d: What do you see as the particular virtues of **SUMMER KING, WINTER FOOL**, and how does it differ from everything else you've done?*

l: Well, it's — what...? High fantasy? Mythic fantasy? That's what Ellen Kushner said.

d: It takes place in a completely invented and made-up world.

l: Which I thought I couldn't do, because I thought it would take me twenty years to come up with a world that would be at all consistent. I just started working on it and it turned out I could do it, which was a pleasant surprise.

d: Well, what are you proudest of in your world building?

l: Just that it's consistent, that I made up a fairly consistent world and a nifty religion. That gets left out a lot, I think.

d: Uh huh. You mean religion gets left out of other people's world-building?

l: Yes. I would put in little details and I'd think, "Oh that's good. That's a good detail." I like doing that. I'd definitely do that again.

*d: So your other most recent book is **TRAVELLERS IN MAGIC**, a short story collection. How do you feel about having your short stories collected?*

l: It's great. I thought — and this turned out I guess to be true — that it would just get me more attention. You know, it's a milestone or something when a short story collection comes out. And people say, "Oh, this person has been writing short stories all these years." It was very gratifying. Someone called me up from the ***Jewish Journal*** to interview me. That was cool.

d: Are you writing more short stories now, or less?

l: About the same. In the middle of a novel I come up with about three or four ideas for short stories and then I just wait until the novel's done and then write them.

*d: Okay. So your last flush of short stories was after **SUMMER KING**?*

l: Yes. I wrote a Sandman story. It's the only comic book I read. It's good. Mythic. You read it?

d: Occasionally. I think Neil's international reputation is well-deserved.

l: Yes.

d: Are your short story ideas generated by random events in daily life? Not by the novel?

l: No, not really. Although when I wrote **STRANGE DEVICES** I wanted to write something about Walter Raleigh and he didn't fit, so I put him in a story. I wrote another Elizabethan story after **STRANGE DEVICES,** too. A time-travel Elizabethan story, that didn't work, but I'm going to go back to it. It's got potential. I did all this research, I've got to do something with it.

d: Yes. Well, what kind of stories are you thinking about now?

l: I just have to sit down and write them. One is a very nebulous story that I want to write about a friend of mine who died.

d: Okay. Why? 'Cause it was important?

l: Yes.

*d: Okay. You said that it took you a long while to write your second book because you had been writing about stuff that was really important to you in **RED MAGICIAN**.*

l: Yes. I have to be interested, otherwise I can't write it.

d: Yes, right.

l: It does take a while sometimes. It always takes a while, now that I think of it, from novel to novel.

d: Yes, well you have to find something that engages you.

l: Yes. At least for the year I'm going to be spending writing the thing.

r: I commented last night to David that one of the things that has interested me about your books is that you have what I would characterize as a "restless imagination". You don't write about the same thing book after book. A lot of writers have — even if they don't write the same book every time — a certain set of themes that they work with, a sort of geography they use, or...

d: Or a set of world-views.

r: It's really interested me that you pick such different topics each time.

l: That would just bore me, I think, to do the same thing over and over again.

d: Yes, well, what I have always done when forced to give a PR statement is that, "Lisa is one of those writers who is exploring the boundaries of the fantastic."

l: I like that.

d: And I think that's a good catch-line, and it actually is accurate.

l: Yes, let me use that.

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Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks to Writers: WHAT IS A SHORT STORY?

When I speak of a short story, I am referring to the commercial or category short story, not the *New Yorker* or "literary" short story. I am dealing with the techniques for writing and selling what is known as *commercial fiction*. I have long contended that anyone who can write a literate English sentence can learn to write and can make a modest living writing for and selling to these markets; but it is necessary to learn a few simple rules. These rules can be broken, and they are broken all the time in commercial fiction; but only by writers who know them so thoroughly that they know exactly how and why to substitute equivalent elements for the mandatory — yes, I said *mandatory* — elements which the editor needs to have in every story she buys.

Virtually all category fiction — whether science fiction, romance, suspense, fantasy, adventure, western or any other category — follows a similar outline which for convenience is known as a *formula*. This word has acquired very negative connotations, but basically it is a simple summing up of what experience has told editors that the readers appear to want in fiction. Writers who master this formula by giving the editor what his readers want can make a modest living anywhere, and some of them make amazing amounts of money. Writers who ignore this formula, either out of ignorance, or because they honestly believe that creative writing must not be bound by the demands of category or formula, usually end up as starving artists — unless they are geniuses, in which case they would not need writing technique classes. They call their work literature, and rage against the public which does not recognize literary forms.

The average reader, however, does not read for literary reasons. The average reader does not know that literary reasons exist. The average reader — this *cannot* be overemphasized if you wish to make a living at writing fiction — reads to be entertained. And the kind of thing the reader wants has been carefully studied and seems not to have varied much since the **ODYSSEY**, the first novel in existence, three thousand years ago or so, which told how a hero struggled through many dangers to get home to his wife and family and run off the bad guys who had moved in on his preserve.

So let us examine the elements of commercial fiction.

THE ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY

Most short stories work on some variation of the following (so do most novels, but the novel works at a different speed):

A LIKABLE CHARACTER overcomes ALMOST INSUPERABLE ODDS and BY HIS OR HER OWN EFFORTS achieves a WORTHWHILE GOAL.

Amateur stories, in general, are unsalable because:

1. The main character is NOT LIKABLE ENOUGH. Your reader wants to be able to identity with the way in which your main character, your protagonist, solves his or her problem. (There is a variation of this plot, in which an Absolute Bastard Gets What is Coming to Him, and the reader enjoys watching him come to grief; but this isn't for beginners.)

2. The odds are NOT INSUPERABLE ENOUGH, or the reader does not believe they are sufficiently insuperable. If your hero/ine goes out to fight a bear, it must not turn out to be a teeny-tiny bear cub he could put in his pocket and take home for a pet. The reader must have a REAL PROBLEM. A FAKE PROBLEM is also known as a "paper tiger".

3. The main character DOES NOT SOLVE HIS PROBLEM BY HIS OWN EFFORTS. The problem is solved FOR the character by his Fairy Godmother, the God in the Machine, or the US Cavalry coming over the hill at the last moment. This deprives the reader of a chance to sweat, struggle, cry over, empathize, suffer with, and otherwise feel the strength of the character as he fights to win out over heavy odds.

4. The RESOLUTION is too predictable, too pat; the reader knows all along that Our Hero will win the ball game, the girl, the war. A subset of this is what is called the "idiot plot" — the plot can keep going only because everybody is acting like an idiot. This is the story where all the problems could be solved by asking a simple question. "Why were you kissing that man?" "Because he is my favorite uncle." End of romantic agonies. This is also the story where the girl does not tell the police what she knows because she jumps to the conclusion that her lover is the murderer.

5. The GOAL is not worthwhile enough, or this particular audience does not see it as worthwhile. *Cosmopolitan* readers, for instance, would probably not be willing to weep and suffer over a housewife who would steal, lie, and cheat to get new cushions for the sofa. It is getting harder and harder (in these days of feminism) for romance writers to convince their mostly-female audience that a woman would suffer all kinds of humiliations for a man because he happens to be rich, handsome, and "romantic". On the other hand, your goal can be just too cosmic: John Wayne winning World War II all by himself, or Captain Kirk saving the Galaxy single-handed.

STARTING YOUR STORY

In the first couple of paragraphs — certainly on the first page, unless your story is approaching novel length — the reader will want to know the following things:

WHO is your main character? Male? Female? A rabbit or a robot, a king or a slave, a macho hero or a wimp, a sensuous siren or a tough Amazon?

WHERE is this happening? We must know whether we are in the dungeons of the Inquisition, near the canals of Mars, cruising the jungles of the Upper Amazon or the deserts of the lower Nile, in the Frozen North or the Golden West or the locker room of the local high school, backstage at the Metro-

politan Opera, or in a dugout with the Yankees.

WHEN does this take place? This is especially important in the science fiction or fantasy novel, but it is also relevant to historicals, Gothics, westerns... everything, perhaps, but ordinary boy-meets-girl romance. In order to create the scenery of the story in his or her head, the reader must know almost at once whether this is today, the day after tomorrow, pre-history, the days of King Arthur or the French Revolution, fifty years ago, or "long, long ago in a Galaxy far far away...."

WHAT kind of story is this? The first page, or paragraph, of a Gothic differs enormously from the beginning of a Western, and neither could be mistaken for the first page of a romance, a fantasy, or a sword-and-sorcery adventure, all of which differ greatly from a story of hard science and technology or from a children's book. You should also establish the feel, or mood, of your story, so that the reader knows at once whether this is a funny, flip satire or a serious romance, whether it is farcical, melancholy, or tragic.

Most readers know exactly what they want to read, and they expect a certain kind of story when they buy a certain kind of magazine. The readers of *Analog* would be very angry if they found a sword-and-sorcery tale in their magazine, and while *Ellery Queen's Mystery* prints science fiction maybe once a year, that sf story has to be an sf *detective* story. When a reader buys a magazine, he has a very clear expectation of the kind of story he wants to read, and if he doesn't get it, he stops buying the magazine; and if the editor doesn't deliver it, the editor is out of a job. If your reader is bored or disappointed by your first page — or paragraph — nothing on earth will induce him to turn the page and read the second. And if the editor is bored or disappointed with page one, no reader of *that* magazine will ever see the story.

SELF CRITICISM: HOW TO ANALYZE YOUR STORY

Most of the elements of the short story (as well as the novelette or novel) come down to these simple elements. They seem so obvious it is hard to understand why many amateur writers never bother to think about them, far less to check them. Yet I get several manuscripts every day in which the writer pays no attention to these simple things.

So as you analyze your story, remember your likable character up against almost insuperable odds, solving his/her problem by personal effort, winning a worthwhile goal and being changed, preferably for the better, by the experience. Remember that the editor needs good stories. If she can't find them and print them and deliver them to her public, she is back pounding pavements looking for another job. Ask yourself:

WHAT KIND OF PERSON is your main character? Can the reader identify, will the reader WANT to identify, with that particular character and his/her problems?

HOW can you best tell this person's story? First person? Third person? Omnipotent observer? Is the story funny, tragic, thoughtful, slapstick?

Where do you START your story? It is seldom right to start when the main character is born. At what point in his or her life is the protagonist facing this critical experience about which you have chosen to write, and why is it important? In general, you should get right into the action. Stories which begin with three pages of description of the weather usually lose the editor after about a page. SHOW, don't TELL, is a good motto.

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY? Nobody, these days, wants a story which concludes "Now, the moral of this story is..."; but in general, what was your story ABOUT? What was the POINT of the story? Analyze to yourself three or four stories that you liked, and ask yourself why you liked them; what made you finish them instead of putting them down half finished and wandering away? What was the author saying? Was the story worth reading? Why or why not?

IN CONCLUSION

Most sales are lost either on the first page, where the editor simply cannot get interested enough in your story to continue reading, or on the last page, where the editor is not satisfied with the solution; the resolution is not tight enough, believable enough, or interesting enough.

Remember one thing: It is *not* the editor's job to try to get interested in your manuscript. She wants to find good stories, and she wants to deliver them to her public, but it's still *your* job to get her (or him) interested in the story you are telling, to keep the editor turning those pages until she comes to the end; you have to keep her *wanting* to turn those pages, *wanting* to find out what happens next. If she makes it that far, even if she can't buy this particular story, she'll remember your name, and next time you have something that meets her needs, you'll probably make a sale.

If the editor gets bored, nothing is easier than to stop reading, reach for a printed form, and put it on the pile for her secretary to reject. There are always more stories waiting. If she is bored with your story, she knows her readers will probably be bored too. It's her job to know what her readers want, and to deliver it to them, so they will keep coming back to her magazine for the kind of entertainment they paid their beer or movie money for.

And this, guys, is where we came in.

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Writers talk back:
The Third Artist

by Heather Rose Jones

An artist travels all over the world, seeing vast landscapes, experiencing five hundred qualities of light and shadow, examining the world contained within the cup of a flower and the flowers contained in the cup of the world. And then she goes and paints what she has seen and experienced. And her works — and those of artists like her — are gathered together and hung in a great gallery.

Another artist is born and grows up in that gallery. She sees the wonderful and exquisite works that surround her and is inspired by them to create her own art. So she paints the things she has seen and imagined in the gallery's halls. And her work, and that of other inhabitants of other galleries is taken and hung in another place.

A third artist is born and grows up in *that* gallery. All she ever sees of the world are those paintings. And when she comes to paint, her works are hardly recognizable as reflect-

ing anything in that outside world, although they are strange and wonderful in their own fashion.

Each artist has taken information in through the senses, filtered out what seemed irrelevant, or not understandable, or distracting to her purpose, and interpreted what was left for other viewers. By the time we get to the third artist, she doesn't know the shapes of the leaves on that distant tree, or what lay on the far side of the mountains, or how birds drink, or perhaps even what the back of a person's head looks like. She has never looked at an object from all sides — picking it up and turning it in her hand — or understood the forces and history that brought the objects in a painting to come together as they have.

Am I talking about some shocking case of sensory-deprivation child abuse? No, I'm talking about the writing of fantasy. Fantasy literature that is not firmly grounded in a knowledge and understanding of how the real world works is like that third painter's works: weird and wonderful and distorted almost beyond recognition.

The world of fantasy — especially that subset inspired by the heritage of the pre-technological West — has developed its own conventions and iconography. We have the index of archetypes: the solitary travelling wizard, the clever and good-hearted thief, the girl who overcomes all obstacles to become a great warrior. We have the file folder of settings: the low quarter of a busy and decadent city, the isolated inn filled with intriguing travellers, the temple of a mysterious deity. And above all, we have those essential plot threads: the foundling child seeking its origin and heritage, the company of comrades who must find a way to mesh their strengths to defeat a great evil, the power of love and the shock of betrayal.

Where do today's aspiring fantasy authors learn these conventions? Alas, all too often from no source other than fantasy novels. And, even more disturbing, too often from novels written by writers who themselves had learnt their subject from fantasy novels — like the third artist.

It is said that the essence of fantasy is convincing your reader to suspend his disbelief. This, too, is the essence of art. Picasso, in a few strokes of a brush, can convince you that you are seeing a beautiful woman. The brush strokes are not the woman, and if you had never seen a woman they would be meaningless to you. But, because you are familiar with the human body, and because those lines suggest a woman to you, you are willing to believe. A talented author, with only a few sentences, will sketch for you an entire civilization and its history. That brief description is not sufficient to reconstruct the society it describes in detail, but because the outlines work — because they fit your knowledge of how the world works — you are willing to believe in the spaces and fill them in for yourself.

And those outlines work because the author knows and understands the world from which they have been traced. She sees the reality behind the sketch and makes sure that the places where her work differs from the underlay are drawn in more detail and merge seamlessly with the parts she has traced from life. She makes sure that when the reader fills in the blank spaces she has left it will be with scenes that do not conflict with what she has shown.

So what happens when our painter/author is working from derivative works instead of life? It means that she doesn't know what fills the spaces. She traces the lines she sees and alters them where she chooses to fit her story, and is unaware of how they mar and distort the underlying scenes that the reader — who has seen the world outside the gallery — has filled into the spaces.

Alright. Let's cut the poetry. What am I talking about? There are ways in which the world works. An author needs to be able to draw on her readers' knowledge of those ways so that she can sketch instead of needing to photograph. (Perhaps a better analogy than photography would be building a computer screen image pixel by pixel.) If you tell your readers X, and X conflicts with the way they know the world works, then you are using up credit in the disbelief-suspension bank. If X isn't a critical feature of your plot, you are using it up to no productive purpose.

Suppose your protagonist is riding a horse, and you have the horse galloping at top speed for two hours without a break. Is this a magic horse and is the fact of its being magic an important element in the plot? If not, go back to square one and do some elementary research on the physical limits of horses.

Suppose your protagonist is badly wounded in a fight, and yet one week later is up and about with only minor inconvenience. What is the state of medical knowledge and sanitation in your society? How did she avoid or survive massive infection? Is "magical" healing available? What are the economics of it and how does it affect the structure and dynamics of society?

You certainly don't want to explain all these questions in detail in the text of the story, but you should know the answers to them yourself, and they should be plausible answers — answers that make sense in the real world, not just in a fantasy world where "anything goes".

But, I hear you argue, these are just standard fantasy conventions — everyone understands them. No one expects them to have anything to do with the real world.

Well, that's where you're wrong. If your story had nothing to do with the real world, your readers would no more be able to understand it from your word-sketches than we would be able to interpret Picasso's nude if we had never seen a living woman.

Every time you deviate from how the real world works, you are putting a strain on the author-reader relationship. Now, of course you *have* to deviate in some important fashion, or you'd be writing contemporary novels instead of fantasy. But the key word there is "important". If you tell the reader "elves exist" or "some people can work magic, and it works like this" or "the gods meddle in the affairs of ordinary people for their own purposes" you are establishing an important parameter of your story. The reader will then reasonably expect the story to revolve in some significant way around elves, magic, or divine interference. If it doesn't, they will wonder why.

Likewise, if you tell your reader (implicitly or explicitly) that horses can run for hours without getting tired and that major wounds can be healed quickly and effectively, then the knowledgeable reader will reasonably expect these facts to figure prominently in the plot. If they don't, your reader is entitled to wonder whether you really understand the world, or whether you — like the third artist — have lived your whole life in a gallery, staring at other people's paintings.

The Counterfeit Maiden

by Richard Purtill

Artwork by Dameon Willich

from the journal of Odysseus, King of Ithaka:

I tried to whip up a little enthusiasm once we had left Ithaka behind and the sight of my beloved island and my wife's tears stopped tearing at my heart. But I had a hard cold feeling somewhere in my chest that this would be no short absence or easy campaign. So when Athena appeared beside me early one morning as I sat in the prow of my ship watching the waves, I looked at her with little hope.

She gave me a level look and said, "I wasn't allowed to interfere. For what it's worth, I'm sorry." I was so used to thinking of her as almost all-powerful that this gave me pause. Then I put my mind to work.

"So this isn't just Agamemnon's idea," I said slowly. "The Olympians are behind it."

She nodded. "Hera mostly, but Poseidon and 'Pollo too. They want Troy destroyed, each for their own reasons. Zeus held out a long time, but at last he agreed. The only question now is how long it will take."

"The shorter the time the better, so far as I'm concerned," I told her. "I'd like to see my son grow up." Athena didn't reply directly to this, but a compassionate look she gave me told me that I had very little chance of getting back to Ithaka soon.

"If you want to see the war over as soon as it may be, you'll have to be ready to give things a bit of a push from time to time," Athena said. "The Olympians who can see the branching paths of the future say that Troy will never fall unless a young warrior named Achilles goes with you. He's the son of Peleus of Aegina and a sea-nymph, Thetis."

"Well, we should be on Aegina soon," I said. But I should have known it wouldn't be that simple: things involving the Olympians or half-Olympians never are.

"Peleus has sent Achilles to Skyros, and King Lycomedes is sworn to conceal him from Agamemnon; Thetis doesn't want her son dying in Agamemnon's quarrels," said Athena. I didn't want to die in Agamemnon's quarrels either, I thought, and hardened my heart to find the young man and get him into Agamemnon's army.

"It won't be that easy," said Athena, seeing my thought as she often did, but less often let me see she did. "Thetis has concealed him among the girls of Lycomedes' court. And I mean *concealed;* she's put an illusion around him that makes Achilles look like a girl and perhaps also darkened Achilles' mind so even he thinks he's a girl. It won't be as easy as finding a young man in a girl's dress among a crowd of real girls. And I can't simply strip away the illusion for you; there are certain — courtesies — that we Olympians observe with each other. Besides Thetis is constantly whining to Zeus and Poseidon about her hard lot and sucking up to them, and even I don't dare go against my Father and my Uncle when that little watering-pot wheedles some promise out of them."

I grinned. "You've praised my wits before this, my Lady," I said. "Surely there must be some way I can get Achilles to betray himself. He hasn't been raised as a girl; there must be a myriad of little ways he won't act as a girl acts." This was beginning to be a puzzle

and a challenge, and I like puzzles and challenges.

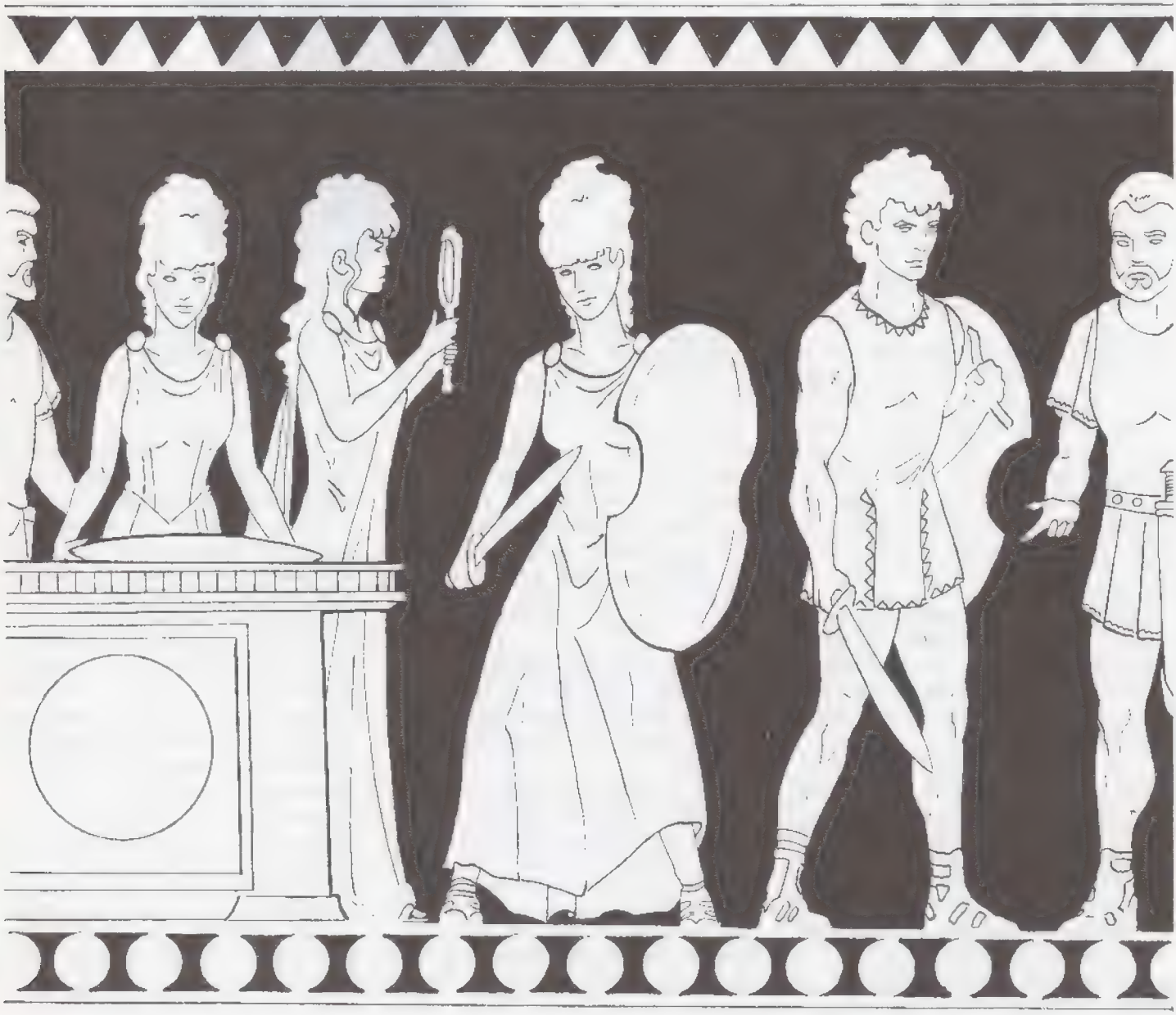
"I'll leave it to you, then," said Athena with a smile. "Achilles won't be totally submerged in his persona as a girl; Thetis isn't skillful enough to make him entirely a girl and yet be able to bring him back when the danger is over. But all the surface things that might betray him, such as his walk or his gestures, are hidden by the veil of illusion."

She was right enough about that. When many weary days sailing later we stood on the High City atop the island of Skyros and looked on the Ladies of the court, not one of them betrayed in any way that she was anything other than what she seemed. "It's no use Agamemnon threatening *me*," said Lycomedes, almost tearfully. "All I know is that these maidens have come to my court for the festival at the Mother. Aside from my own daughters, I don't know *any* of them. If a certain person is among them in disguise, my mouth is stopped by ignorance as well as by oaths. And if Agamemnon carries out his threat to make them strip off their clothing, he'll make a mortal enemy of every king in the scattered islands, as well as offending the Mother. And *I'll* be blamed for not stopping him."

"The High King has been persuaded to reconsider that idea," I said dryly. I was still exhausted from the nonstop persuasion *that* had taken. The stupider the idea, the harder it was to talk Agamemnon out of it, I was discovering. Even getting permission to manage the affair on my own had taken prodigies of persuasion. Agamemnon, who was now calling himself the High King, had a seer named Kalchos, who could be relied on to come out with an inconvenient prophecy at the worst possible time. It was Kalchos who had told Agamemnon that Achilles was here on Skyros and that the war could not be won without him.

My more accurate information came from Athena, but since I could not explain that — or would not, at any rate — I couldn't simply tell the "High King" that stripping the girls would be no use; that the illusion cast by Thetis would be proof against such simple remedies.

"The High King requests," I said,



Artwork by Dameon Willich

taking Agamemnon's name in vain for the first time — there were many times after I did the same — "that these Ladies be assembled to receive the gifts he had sent for them, in their honor and in honor of the Mother." Well, young women are rarely averse to gifts and soon the young women, and one who was not a young woman, clustered around as the Ithakans and Spartans who were playing at being porters and servants began opening the bundles.

If you think it is easy to find gifts for a score of young women in a group of men setting off on a battle campaign, you have never tried it. I had finally had to get into the "fines" which Agamemnon had collected from kings reluctant to join the expedition, and without the help of Menelaus, I could never have done that. You would have thought from Agamemnon's cries that we were stealing the bread from his children's mouths.

But I had finally assembled enough to make a good show; some bronze three-legged pots of the kind Danaans call "tripods," some lengths of cloth, even a few mirrors and trinkets. Scattered among these were a few implements of war; several decorated shields, a highly ornamented sword or two, even a few spears.

The girls were invited to take their pick, and they moved among the gifts, chattering and laughing. One tall girl seemed fascinated by a sword and shield, but since they were beautifully designed, "she" might just have had an eye for good work. But when "she" pulled the sword out of the sheath and tested its edge, I was fairly sure I had located my quarry. Now to make him give himself away.

I made a signal to one of the "servants," an Ithakan, and he made his way quietly out of the little courtyard. For a few moments there was silence broken only by the chatter of the girls, then there was the clash of arms from outside the courtyard, the cries and shouts of men surprised by a sudden attack. One of my Ithakans ran into the courtyard, blood streaming from an apparent wound on his head. "My Lord Odysseus!" he cried. "Raiders from the sea!" then fell down in a realistic faint.

"Sound the war cry!" I called and drew my own sword. As the war horn sounded from outside and my men gave the chant or cry the Spartans call the "paean" I whirled around to where the tall "girl" had stood. "She" had snatched up the shield and had it on "her" arm; the sheath of the sword "she" had simply shaken off with a quick flick of the wrist. "She" still had the illusion of a girl's form, but no girl but an Amazon maiden could have leapt to arms with such practiced skill.

"Ground arms," I called and, sheathing my own sword, I walked up to the armed "maiden" and bowed. "Achilles, son of Peleus," I said. "The enemy is not as close as I made you think, but we do need your sword."

The illusion of a girl's form fell from Achilles and I saw for the first time the thrusting nose, the thin lips, the glittering eyes of the greatest warrior of our age. Even I might have quailed if those eyes had looked on me with hatred for my trick, but slowly a grin crept over his face and he said, "Fairly caught, King of Ithaka, and the promise my mother tricked out of me is now discharged. Lead me to your enemies, and they will weep for the day when you freed the son of Thetis from the guise of a girl!"

❄

Richard Purtill was born in Chicago. He studied philosophy at the University of Chicago, earning his PhD in 1965. Since 1962 he has been a professor of philosophy at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. After a second honeymoon with his wife in Greece, Richard Purtill became fascinated with the country. He has returned many times, writing three fantasy novels for adults based on Greek mythology: **THE GOLDEN GRYPHON FEATHER**, **THE STOLEN GODDESS**, **THE MIRROR OF HELEN**, and a Y-A novel, **ENCHANTMENT AT DELPHI**. Purtill has also written a science fiction novel, a mystery, and various short stories of fantasy, science fiction, and mystery.

Dameon Willich is a Seattle-based artist who keeps his own small herd of horses and is director of the Seattle Knights Equestrian/Show Troupe.

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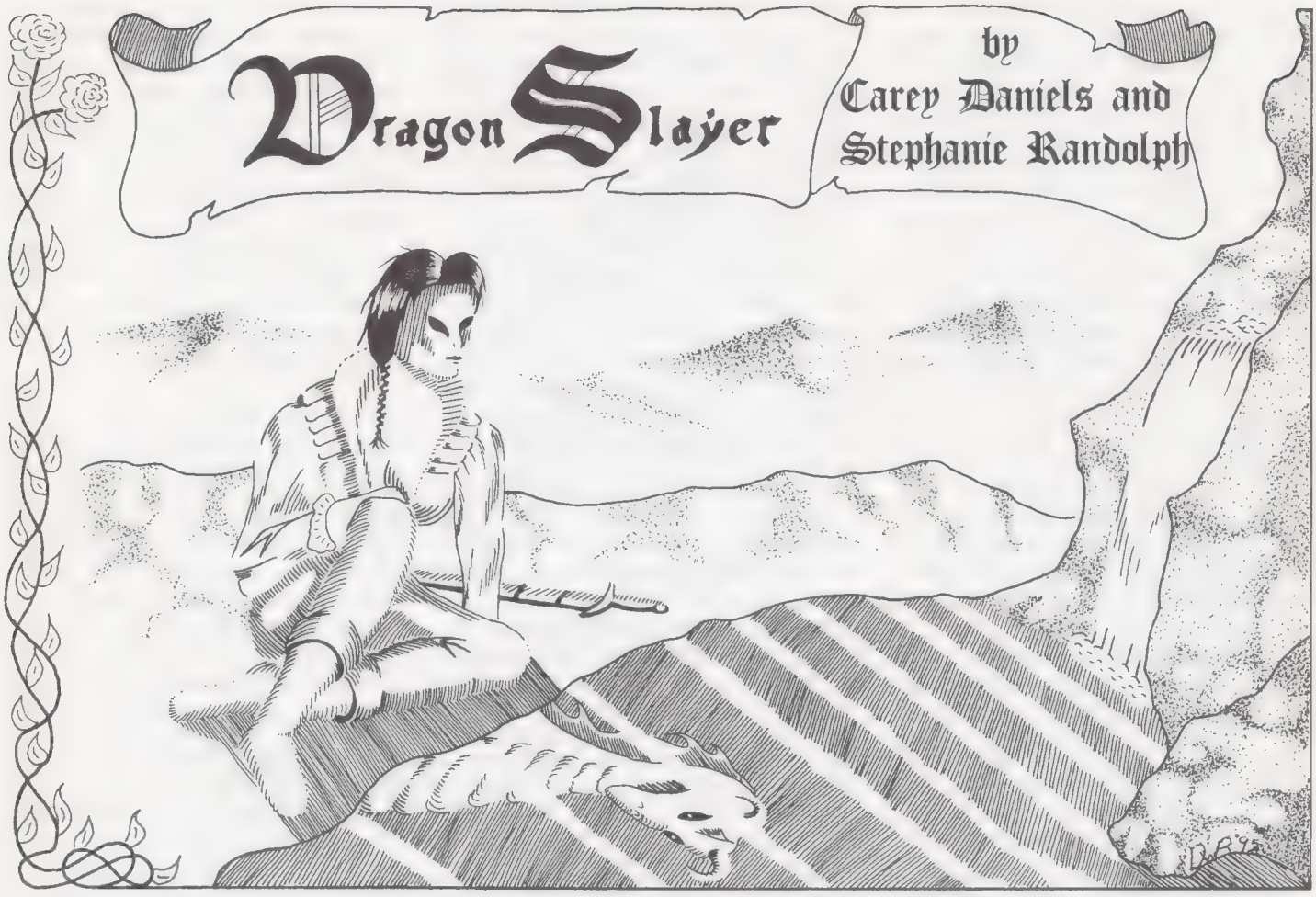
Dragon Slayer

by Carey Daniels and Stephanie Randolph



Artwork by Donald W. Rissler

Evenelle knelt down at the bank of a small pond near her cave. She looked at her reflection, making certain she was properly attired to go into town.

Black hair, green eyes, sharp nose, carefully placed scars and calluses, worn clothes, just beginning the prime of her life. Yes, everything was as it should be. Her costume was flawless. At least the physical part was... No matter how well she disguised herself as a human, her draconic personality stuck out like a cracked claw. But only if you knew what a draconic personality was like — which the townspeople did not.

Evenelle stumbled down the hill, not used to having only two feet, and no wings. She only shapechanged once a year to visit with the townspeople, buy a few supplies, and tell a few tales, as Evenelle the "famous mercenary".

Not only did she look the part, but she was a fabulous liar. She could always get a few gold pieces for telling stories of all her wonderful, nonexistent adventures, and a dragon who can resist gold is not a true dragon.

She gave a wistful sigh as she glanced at some sheep grazing in a nearby field. The dragon realized that she should probably wait a few days before raiding the livestock again. She had been doing it an awful lot lately, but now that winter was over, she was regaining energy to go out and hunt for herself. Cold made dragons, like any other reptile, sluggish and extremely lazy.

Evenelle crashed through some shrubbery and undergrowth, and finally tripped onto the dirt road that led her into the town.

She walked the cobblestone streets, calling greetings to familiar faces. She only visited once a year, but nothing ever changed much here.

She reached the town's only tavern, where she always spent her one day. There was always someone there to pay for a good tale. She walked in to the sound of cheering by a few of the regulars rolling dice, and sat down at a table in the corner. She never began right away — there was drinking to do first. It was a good thing that dragons never got drunk, because with all the people willing to buy her a drink, she'd have to concentrate more on staying on her stool than telling stories.

All of her usual patrons and acquaintances came to chat with her, bringing along pitcher after pitcher of ale. Evenelle wished they would save their money for her. Every time someone would lay a gold piece down for the barmaid to take away, Evenelle couldn't keep her eyes from following it until the girl placed it safely in the confines of a jar in the back of the bar.

Some time later on, a young man approached Evenelle. He had the look of a farmer about him. His face, young as it was, was sun browned and slightly weatherbeaten. He'd made an obvious effort at cleaning himself to look presentable for a visitor of the town, but Evenelle could still see dirt under his fingernails and worn parts of his clothing.

"Lady," he asked hesitantly, "may I sit?" Evenelle could tell that he was nervous because of the way he wouldn't meet her eyes, and he kept fidgeting with the strings of a pouch he was

carrying. The pouch itself enthralled her; she couldn't take her eyes from it. It almost seemed to shimmer, with an inner luminescent quality all its own.

"Yes, of course..." said Evenelle absentmindedly, her eyes glued to the pouch.

"My name is Kal," began the man. "I own one of the farms out behind the hill," he said, gesturing. "Me an' some of the other men, well, we've been having some trouble, you see, with beasties killin' our livestock, an' we figured that you, bein' a mercenary an' all, could help us out."

Kal dumped the contents of his pouch out onto the table. A rolled-up piece of parchment fell out, which he picked up. Kal then proceeded to talk about some great challenge, that he knew she could do it, but it fell on deaf ears. For something else had fallen out of the pouch. A good-sized pile of small, irresistibly shiny gold now occupied Evenelle's whole range of vision as it rested on the table. Her eyes glazed over, Evenelle was lost in a perfect dream.

"Half up front," she heard Kal say, but she didn't care. She just stared at the gold, oblivious to all else.

Evenelle went up to one of the rooms over the tavern. She had sat up late into the evening telling her "stories" of grand adventure — being taken captive on a pirate ship, wandering the quicksand swamps of the south, traveling to see the jungle tigers of the west and the crocodiles of the east, along with other such nonsense.

But her heart hadn't really been in it this night. Her mind couldn't be taken from the gold in the pouch at her waist. Now, she finally had time to herself to count it, admire it, memorize every shining detail of each golden coin...

Then she remembered that Kal had given her that parchment — after she had hastily scribbled her name on it. She supposed she should look at it — it might have something to do with the gold.

Evenelle sat down on the soft pallet that served as her bed and pulled the parchment from the pouch, her fingers lingering on the cool surface of the coins for just a moment. She read the parchment. It was a contract. A contract to kill the evil beast that had been feeding on the town's livestock. A contract to kill the dragon.

❄

Carey Daniels and **Stephanie Randolph** are students at Maine-Endwell High School in New York State. Carey has an interest in art (19th and early 20th century) and music (cello) and aspires to a profession that involves writing. Stephanie is also a musician (flute) and a volunteer at the local hospital. This is their first professional sale.

Donald W. Rissler holds several degrees in Fine Art and Illustration, and worked as a freelance illustrator in the corporate sector for the last four years. Before that he held such various occupations as musician and race car driver.

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la donna triste

by Patricia Russo

"It's getting dark," said the pony cart driver.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "It's only four in the afternoon."

"I won't drive up Montirto after dark. The road isn't safe."

"It shan't come to that. The train will arrive soon."

"This cousin of yours, is it a man or a woman?" he asked, abruptly.

The question was not at all polite, and neither was the tone. I was hot, dusty, and the train I'd driven down to meet was now exactly two hours late. "Mind the reins don't tangle," I snapped. "And indeed it is past time the pony had some water. My cousin is a gentleman."

"And he'll be staying at your villa?"

"Really! I hired you to drive, not to pepper me with impertinent questions."

"Forgive me, signora," he said, not looking at me. And not meaning it, either, I dare say.

When I first came to Montirto, the air was as pure as Alpine snow and as sweet as new grass, and the natives of the village simple and unassuming people. Now the air is as choking as London's, and the people nearly as rude. I lay the fault squarely on the rail line.

My villa is on the eastern side of the mountain, facing the water, but even the sea-wind off the bay isn't enough to cleanse the air. Every day dark clots of gray smoke and bits of unburnt coke stream from the heads of a dozen engines as trains arrive and depart. A gritty soot coats the flagstones, windows, and once-whitewashed walls of the village. Daily, oily flakes of ash settle on the kitchen vegetables and chrysanthemum bushes in my garden. The stray cats that roam the village streets are constantly licking streaks of black grime from their coats.

The natives of Montirto have embraced the rail line. Already Montirto is no longer really a village, but a town. Soon it will be a city.

"There was some sort of accident on the line," Francis said, dully.

He looked tired and disheveled, and he'd sweated right through both shirt and jacket. Sitting loosely on the narrow plank seat behind the driver, he bounced each time the cart rattled. I was surprised at how little luggage he'd brought, and said so loudly, to prevent myself from remarking on his appearance. He looked old.

"I lost a trunk," he muttered.

The driver spoke sharply to the pony. The poor beast had been badly used that day, made to stand for long hours in the hot sun. Now it hung its head as it struggled to pull us up the mountainside. The driver clucked at it impatiently, then snatched up his whip and lashed it across the rump. The pony jerked forward with a loud whinny.

"I say," exclaimed Francis, who'd been jolted. "No need for that. You tell him, Lillian."

"There is no hurry," I said to the driver.

"It's getting dark," he answered, curtly.

"There's more than enough time. Don't be afraid. If you wish, you may stay the night in the servants' quarters, and descend in the morning."

"In Montirto Vecchio?" the man said, with a loud snort. He lashed the pony again.

"Lillian! What's going on? You, man — put down that whip!"

The driver paid him no heed.

I sighed. "Let it go, Francis. The man is afraid."

"Afraid? What the devil of?"

"*La donna triste.*" I had to lean close to his ear and repeat the words twice. "The sad lady. That's what the villagers call her. She cries in the woods at night."

"'Cries in the woods'?" Francis looked at me with raised brows, clearly suspecting a joke.

"Yes. She utters mournful cries. They are wordless, but the tone is that of great grief."

"A peasant superstition," he said. Then, with a little shake of his head, he added, "Owls, of course."

"No. Not owls."

"Tell me more about this *donna*."

"Have an orange," I said. "They're from Sicily."

"Thank you, no," he said, giving the

bowl of fruit an unappreciative glance. "I'd like to hear more about this crying woman."

"Perhaps we should leave that until tomorrow."

"No, I assure you. I am quite eager to hear the tale."

"It's quite late, and you're tired from the journey. Rest will do you more good than conversation."

"Perhaps I should be the judge of that," he said, a bit sharply.

"And perhaps there are tales that should not be told after dark."

Francis stared at me, his eyes slowly widening. Then he laughed. "Why, Lillian. I should never have credited it. Have you been in this country so long you've come to believe its superstitions?"

"I've heard *la donna triste* myself. Indeed, I've done so frequently."

"Have you ever seen this creature?"

"No."

"In my opinion, it's very likely a wolf. There are still many wolves in Italy."

"It's no wolf."

He swirled the last of the wine around the bottom of his glass, then drank. "Do you believe, then, that some poor woman is living in the woods below this villa, and that she is given to wandering about at night, frightening pony-cart drivers and other such folk?"

I pursed my lips. I had never, of course, intended to conceal the story from him. I would have preferred to tell it to him at a time of my own choosing — a time when Francis was less tired, and not so irritable. It was impossible to stop now, though.

"She is not a woman," I said. "Not a mortal woman, not a creature of flesh and blood."

He barked a laugh. "A ghost? Really, Lillian!"

"No. Not a ghost, either. She is quite material. Her feet leave tracks, and her passage through the bramble is marked by broken twigs."

"Material, yet not mortal?" Francis said, mockingly. "Not human, but not a ghost? Lillian, do you realize what nonsense this is?"

"Listen to me, Francis. This is no fireside tale. I've seen what she — leaves behind."

"And what may that be?"

"Her grief is not feigned," I said, slowly. "It has a real and terrible cause. She cries over the bones of her dead lover."

"I say! A truly romantic detail." He turned his face away, but could not completely disguise the yawn. "Forgive me, my dear, but I find that I am tired. And your ghost story has quite taken it out of me."

"It's not a story. Padre Antonio showed me old church annals, some dating back more than seven hundred years, in which *la donna triste* is mentioned. He believes she may have been here much longer than that. Francis, you must promise me something."

"What?"

"If you hear sounds of weeping or lamenting, cries of great pain or grief, or anything that seems to you like a call for help in a woman's voice, tonight or any other night you stay in this villa, you must not venture out. Indeed, you must not stir from you bed even so far as the window. Promise me, Francis."

"Really, Lillian," he remonstrated.

"She is very compelling, Francis. The power of her call ... I don't believe it oversteps the bounds of propriety to describe it as seductive."

"My dear," he said, standing up and stretching, "you've knocked the legs out from under your story with your own lips. If this siren is so powerful,

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

how is it that a large, bustling town can prosper so close to her lair? And you yourself have lived here many years without falling into her trap."

"The natives know enough to stay out of the woods at night, and they guard themselves with prayers and charms. Even so," I said, "occasionally one falls victim to *la donna*. As for me ... I have found that my own grief serves as my protection against hers. Francis, please believe that I am serious. Those she lures to her, she destroys. You are a stranger here, and a man. Do not answer any call, any call at all, in a woman's voice after dark."

"What, not even 'help, fire'?"

And laughing, he went to bed.

"It wouldn't be my primary residence, you understand," Francis said. "But winters at home are so disagreeable. My wife's a bit delicate. Suffers from the cold, you know."

"The winters are quite mild here."

"Even with the wind off the sea?"

"The villa is sheltered by the mountain."

"There's no shooting to speak of, I suppose?"

"Some of the villagers snare rabbits in the woods. But no, I don't suppose you'll get the sport here you're used to. There are wild boar in the Campagna, however."

Francis sniffed. Then he glanced at me. "They trap coneys in the woods, do they? With that Sad Lady of yours roaming about?"

"It's quite safe in the daylight."

Francis was smiling. "I expect you'll be glad to see England again, after all this time. You'll find it greatly changed."

"I'm sure I should, if I were to return there. But I don't plan to."

"You mean to stay on here, then?" he asked, surprised.

"No. I'm going to Greece. One of the smaller islands — I'm considering Samothrace, but perhaps I'll settle in Cos."

Francis stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. "No, Lillian. I refuse to believe you are serious. You can't mean to travel alone to such an uncertain part of the world. And to live there? You're not a young woman any longer. It's hardly proper for an English lady to live unprotected among foreigners."

"Francis, I've been alone for nearly twenty years."

"Yes, and it's high time for you to live among your own people again. Look at yourself, Lillian! You're almost an Italian. Jabbering away to the servants in their own tongue like a native, believing their superstitions. I wouldn't be surprised to hear you'd converted to the Church of Rome. You haven't, have you?"

"No, Francis."

"Thank God for that. England is your true home, Lillian. Perhaps Italy feels like home to you as well, after all the years you've spent here. But Greece —"

"England died for me when James did," I said, quietly. "And Italy is becoming unbearable."

Francis winced. Looking away, he said, "I'm sorry. I meant to ask you to take me to visit the grave the day after I arrived. It slipped my mind. I apologize."

"Don't apologize, Francis. It's a kind thought. Thank you."

"Let's go tomorrow. The graveyard is behind that church we saw on the way up here, isn't it?"

"Yes. But there's no hurry. Tomorrow I'd like to take you to the market. It's the big weekly event in Montirto Vecchio."

"Sounds fascinating."

"If you're going to live here, you'll need to know where to send your servants to do the marketing — and it wouldn't hurt you to familiarize yourself with the local produce, either."

He smiled. "How do you know I've made up my mind to take it?"

"Haven't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I have. I'll have to wire my banker — and Daphne, of course."

"I'm glad, Francis. I'm very glad."

"But Lillian, why Greece?"

"Oh, the wine-dark sea," I said. "The ground on which Odysseus and Agamemnon once trod."

"Be serious," he spluttered.

I smiled. "Greece is a poor country, rich in antiquities and not much else, and therefore a land in which a foreign lady of limited means may live comfortably. And breathe easily."

"But it's so remote."

"Exactly. The islands I mentioned are populated by fisherfolk and farmers. Both the people and the land are still quite unspoilt. There are no rail lines on either Cos or Samothrace, and if the fates are kind, the first will not be laid until after I'm dead."

Francis laughed. "You used to be such a sensible woman, Lillian. I can't believe how much you've changed. Don't you realize you can't hold back progress?"

"Perhaps not," I said. "But I don't have to give in to it."

I heard the weeping at about two o'clock in the morning. I always hear her when she cries; it is a peculiarity of the situation of my bedroom. The sound stirred me out of sleep, but I stayed under the sheet, no more than half awake, and to my shame I did not think of Francis until I heard his window-shutter slam violently against the outside wall.

I rose then, quickly, and threw on my wrap. Barefooted, I hurried to his room. The door was open, the window flung wide, the bedclothes disarrayed. Francis was gone.

He must have just gone. He could not have reached the woods yet. It was dark, and he was not familiar with the grounds. I ran to rouse the servants — there was still time to catch him, though it would take all four of us to hold him if we did. Francis was more correct than he knew when he called her a siren.

"Carmella! Nuccia! Gianluigi! Quickly!" I shouted. "Gianluigi, put on your boots! *Presto! Poltroni! Alzatevi!*"

Not one of them would help me. Muttering words they fancied I didn't understand — after nearly two decades in their country! — they refused to stir an inch out of their beds before daylight.

I shouted at them long after I knew there was no longer any point. *La donna triste*'s cries ceased at twenty minutes to three. She began to weep again scarcely a quarter of an hour later, and I knew Francis was gone.

I discharged the servants the next morning. I told them to pack their belongings and to be out of the villa by noon. Then I walked down the mountainside to Montirto Vecchio, and went directly to the mayor's office.

The mayor heard me out with sympathy. A great-uncle of his had suffered the same fate, forty years ago, he told me. Swiftly, he organized a force of volunteers to accompany me into the woods.

We walked slowly. The woods were trackless, and we were obliged to force our way through the bristly thorn bushes — the *irti* — that gave the vil-

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

lage its name. The men kept silent — out of respect, out of fear, I neither knew nor cared. We reached *la donna*'s haunt just before midday. The sun was bright, despite the thick foliage of the tall trees that grew there, and the men hesitated only slightly before following me. One commented on how well I knew the way.

"I should," I told him. "I have been this way before."

He was young, or he wouldn't have asked. After a moment, I heard one of the older men whispering to him. I didn't need to hear the words to know he spoke of my husband.

A memory swept over me of the lying letters I wrote to his parents and mine, detailing the symptoms of a sudden illness ... in each letter he grew worse, and in the last, black-bordered one, I informed our families than James had died. Now I would have to write others, and with the same lie inscribed at the end of the final communication: that due to fear of infection, the body could not be shipped home for burial, but would be interred in the local churchyard, in the section reserved for foreigners and others not professing the Catholic faith.

The truth is we dare not take her prey from her. If we did she would cry louder, and so attract another victim all the sooner. That is what the people of Montirto say, and I believe them. They are wise in the ways of *la donna triste*. They have had to be.

Padre Antonio believes she was left on this mountain by the old Romans. Bound there by them, perhaps. I don't know. I don't care. Let her cry over bones, I say. Let her cry over old bones, let her spend her grief on dust.

Francis lay naked in the mould beneath an ancient, gnarled oak tree. His nightshirt hung on a bramble bush, caught by a thorn. He'd obviously cast it aside blindly. He was on his side, arms stretched out, as if still embracing the eager form which had lain with him last night, during those brief minutes in which he had eased the eternal sadness of the weeping woman. His embrace had allowed her to abandon the old bones she had cried over for more than nineteen years. She had consigned them, at last, to their natural decay.

Now his body lay in their place. The flesh would rot; her powers could not preserve that. But the bones would remain, for months, for years, for decades if fate was kind. Let her grieve over them.

Let them be the last she grieved for.

I must have spoken the words aloud, for the man behind me murmured, "Amen," and crossed himself.

"Signora," the mayor began, with the tone of one performing a painful duty. "Do you recognize the body as that of the foreigner Francis Atterbury?"

"I do," I said.

He hesitated. "Are there any arrangements you wish to be made?"

That was a courtesy question merely. If I had requested that the body be taken up, sealed in a lead-lined coffin, and placed aboard the next ship to England, the mayor and his men would have nodded, offered reassuring words, and quite rightly done nothing of the kind.

"I will handle it," I said, and they understood me.

I cannot call her a demon. I do not believe her to be evil. She does what she does out of a great need, a need which is stronger than that of food, of shelter, of heat in winter or shade in summer: the need for love. She is the last of her kind, and so must make do with mortal men and women. But her love kills us. She sorrows for that, sorrows truly and deeply. You need only listen to her to know that.

If only there existed another like her. But I fear there are no more of her kind in this world of churches and railroads, coal mines and steamships. *La donna triste* is alone. Her world fell with Rome; a thousand Renaissance frescos will not bring it back.

When we reached the village, most of the party dispersed to their daily duties. The mayor escorted me back to my villa.

And there I have remained.

❄

Patricia Russo has previously been published in the Tor anthology **WOMEN OF DARKNESS**, as well as in small press zines such as *Space and Time*, *White Knuckles*, *Symphonie's Gift*, *Dark Muse*, and *Nyx Obscura*. She notes that she lives with a dog, a cat, and a mother "who mutters, 'Get a job', with depressing regularity."

Armand Cabrera is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really since 1980. He worked for several years in the computer game field, at Lucas Films on their *STAR WARS* games and at Electronic Arts as a computer artist.

A Suitable Suitor

by Jackie Shank

Bridget eyed the princess with outward aplomb, and inward trepidation. Her actual experience of princesses was none at all, but folklore told her they were capricious and dangerous. Bridget was a brave woman under normal circumstances, but she had only just gone into the business of errantry-for-pay, and was made apprehensive by the princess's imperious demeanor.

Princess Alizina was tall and slender, with plain but regular features, very pale skin, rather nice blue eyes, and crooked teeth. Her brilliant red hair was so wildly styled that her head resembled a bright orange chrysanthemum. As if to exaggerate the effect of the hair, she wore a gown the color of sand. A bright orange chrysanthemum afloat on the desert, unattached to anything living, Bridget thought.

Pull yourself together, she told herself. She sent for you, she must want something. Pay attention, she's talking to you.

"... and my father is determined that I shall be married within the year," the princess was saying. "Mind you, it isn't so much that I object to being married, if only to escape the stifling confines of my father's Court. But I don't want to marry just anybody. In fact, I won't marry anyone unless I approve of him. You do see my problem, don't you?"

"Of course. You want prior approval of a man before you will be betrothed to him, but ..."

"I know my father, you see," Princess Alizina interrupted. "He will pick someone who will make a useful alliance, and while I have no objection to allying one's kingdom with another, I will *not* marry a toad just for political gain."

"Naturally not, Your Highness. But what is it you want me to do? Get acquainted with the one your father chooses, to see if he's suitable?"

"Certainly not," the princess stormed. "By the time he has someone picked out it will be too late for me to object. No, what I want is that you will go out into the neighboring kingdoms and find a prince whom I will like, perhaps even love. And then come back and tell me about him so that I can tell Father."

"But how will I know if you will like the one I select?"

"You're a woman. That's why I chose you. Pick one *you* would like."

"But, Your Highness, tastes differ. I might like someone you would think was a, a toad. Give me at least a hint."

"Oh, very well," Alizina said. She thought for a moment. "Find someone taller than I, and not fat, and reasonably intelligent. He'd better not have a quick temper — I'm not patient with impatient people. It would be nice if he didn't have any really terrible bad habits, and I'd like a sense of humor."

"Tall, slim, intelligent, placid, clean-living," Bridget ticked off on the fingers of one hand. "Oh, and a sense of humor." She stuck up the thumb of the other hand.

"Yes, and he'd better be rich and powerful and not from a kingdom that is too distant, to satisfy my father."

Three more fingers went up. "Rich, powerful, nearby. Are there a great many kingdoms nearby?"

"Certainly. Start with the closest one and work your way around," the princess instructed. "If you start now, you should be halfway to one of our borders by evening."

"My apologies, Your Highness, but I cannot start just yet, I must ..."

Alizina drew herself up to her full height, which was very nearly Bridget's own six feet. "Can you possibly have said that you cannot start just yet?" she demanded.

"There are a couple of things to be done before I start," Bridget said, as firmly as she was able. The princess's eyes were glittering dangerously.

"And these things are?" Her voice was cold, cold as a cave.

"Well, for one thing, I haven't had lunch yet ..."

"Oh pooh, lunch," Her Highness snorted. "I thought you meant something important."

"Lunch *is* important, Your Highness," she said. "I'm hungry. For another thing, I shall need maps. I am familiar with the lands to the north of this nation, but not the other direc-

Artwork by Alan Gutierrez

tions."

"The Chamberlain will furnish you with more maps that you will want," Alizina assured her. "You have but to ask. And now, farewell."

"Your Highness, there is another matter."

"Another? You said a couple of things, which were lunch and maps. They are taken care of: the Chamberlain will give you the latter and the cook the former."

"I ought to have said three things, and the third, as is usual with fairy tales, is the most important."

"This is no fairy tale, and you are impertinent. But I will indulge you this once. What is the third thing?"

"It is the matter of my payment, Your Highness."

"Your *payment*! Can you doubt that you shall be amply rewarded when you have complied with my instructions?"

"Well, but that's just it, Your Highness. Suppose I am unable to find a suitable suitor?"

"That's what dungeons are for, of course."

"Unsuitable suitors?"

"No, those who fail in their quests."

Bridget wondered if she could fight her way clear if the princess called her guard, concluded that she probably could not, summoned her rapidly receding courage, and said, "I don't believe we have understood one another, Your Highness."

"Possibly not. Explain."

"I have gone into the errantry *business*, Your Highness, and therefore I expect to be paid for my efforts, one gold piece per week, plus expenses, with ten extra gold pieces if I succeed and no penalty if I fail." She half hoped her fees would be so high that the princess would refuse to pay and send her home. She wasn't looking forward to trying to find a suitable suitor for an Orange Chrysanthemum.

"That's outrageous!" The princess stamped her not-so-dainty foot.

"Well, in that case, I'm off home, Your Highness," Bridget said, trying to sound insouciant.

"No! No, wait, I need your services, so I'll pay you. I can't give you gold pieces, I haven't any, but I have a heavy gold chain." She snapped her fingers and said to the serving maid who entered, "Have Valerie bring me the gold chain left to me by my mother." She turned back to Bridget. "You may have the chain when you return with a marital candidate of whom I approve."

"And if you do not approve?"

"Then I will give you half the chain. The gold links are of great value in themselves. You could sell them, they're each worth two or three gold coins."

"If they are of great value, you may give me half the chain before I go, and I will waive extra costs for expenses."

"And you will take the gold and disappear into your uncouth northern wastes with it, while I am left with half a chain and no suitor. I think not."

"The North is neither uncouth nor a waste," Bridget said, indignation flashing in her eyes. "And I am accounted there an honest person. You sent for me, Your Highness, I didn't ask to come here. If you do not feel you can trust me, then I will leave empty-handed, but with my honor intact."

Just then Valerie, an elderly lady who was apparently the princess's companion, or perhaps her former nanny, entered carrying a spectacular chain, one with inch-long links and a diamond-encrusted pendant.

"The pendant is not part of the bargain," the princess said. "Only the gold links. There are twenty-four of them. You may have ten of them now, and the other fourteen when you return, having completed your quest successfully."

"I will have twelve of them now, and the other twelve when I bring you your prince. Unless you don't like him, in which case you will owe me nothing further. But you will be responsible for sending him home." Bridget was feeling braver, her services being needed.

"Sending who home? Whom."

"The unsuccessful candidate, of course."

"No. If you bring someone I don't like, you must be responsible for sending him back. Those are my final terms."

Bridget thought about it, looked at the chain carefully and, with the princess's permission, weighed it in her hand. She looked into the princess's blue eyes, and said, "Done."

"Oh," Alizina said, "I almost forgot. There is one other thing."

Bridget sighed.

The princess extracted a very small picture from a pocket in her gown. "This miniature of me was made by the Court painter, and has had a special spell put upon it by my Uncle Casimir, who is a wizard."

She handed the tiny picture to Bridget, who conjectured that the spell was to make the princess look more beautiful than she really was.

"I know that it's flattering," said Her Highness, "but notice especially that the mouth is not smiling." Bridget nodded. "If, no *when*, you meet a prince whom I *might* approve, the portrait will smile."

Well, Bridget thought, that ought to simplify things. "I'll start as soon as I have the maps," she said aloud. "And half the chain. And lunch."

The princess called for a smith and the Chamberlain, and within an hour Bridget had the chain in an inside pocket, maps in a case slung on the pommel of her saddle, and a bag of food hanging off the other side. She had decided to make a giant sweep counterclockwise, starting at the western border of the kingdom, which was the closest to the capital city of Bel'Terra.

She was astonished at the sheer number of little kingdoms the map showed surrounding Alizina's kingdom. She herself came from the enormous expanse of the northern steppes, and therefore found it incredible that with every second day of travel, she would be crossing another national border.

She was grateful, however, for she would thus be able to inspect what she considered an astounding number of princes in a relatively short time and distance.

The prince in the first kingdom was suitable in every way, save one. He was tall, good-looking, intelligent, reasonably patient, and must have had a splendid sense of humor for he laughed a great deal. But he was ten years old.

The next kingdom had no prince, only four princesses. After that she visited one where the prince was a babe in arms, and one where the king was in his dotage and the childless prince not far behind.

She was discouraged, but continued her search. Her next stop was in a small country where the king was newly married and therefore had no heir as yet.

Then she found a prince who had many of the qualities she herself liked in a man, but she rejected him on Alizina's behalf because he was short and had a slight limp. The unsmiling portrait confirmed her in her rejection. One day, she thought, Alizina might learn to appreciate a man's qualities

apart from his appearance, but that day had not yet arrived.

In the next kingdom the king's son was young, single, intelligent, and tall, but he had a perfectly awful temper and no sense of humor whatever.

Then she found one who laughed a great deal, but as she studied him she realized that he laughed chiefly at other people's pain or humiliation.

She thought she had found her man in the ninth kingdom she rode into. The king himself was unmarried, young, tall, and very handsome with curly hair and a cleft chin. He seemed intelligent, and patient, and was, moreover, very rich. She stayed several days in his kingdom, watching him, more and more convinced that this was the one. The smile on the princess's painted face confirmed both that this might be the prince she was hunting, and that the princess's teeth had been painted as if they were straight.

But she happened to be in the kingdom during the two-day celebration of some national holiday, and sat at the bottom table in the king's great hall at the banquet, among the servants. She watched the king get very drunk and very disagreeable. He forced his attentions on one young woman, who pushed him away, and fell unconscious at the feet of another, who had encouraged him.

When Bridget peeked at the face in the portrait, she found that it was frowning. The next morning she saddled her horse, Barnaby, and rode on.

Barnaby was limping and Bridget was saddle-weary, dusty, and very thirsty the afternoon she rode into the city of Phylahm, capital of the country of Parna. She found an inn called The Creeping Ivy, stabled Barnaby, and took a room for herself.

After bathing, and eating a hearty luncheon, she led Barnaby out in the direction of the farrier she had been told of. "Down this street, ma'am," said the potboy, "turn right at the second alley, and it's just a short distance from the turning, you can't miss it." It was a lovely fall day, and she didn't hurry.

A short distance from the turning she found, not a farrier, but a gang of five cutthroats, who demanded her money or her life. She had left the nine remaining links of the gold chain in the inn-keeper's safe, so she drew her sword from the scabbard on her back and prepared to defend her life.

Very soon she realized that her chances of beating back the villains were getting slimmer by the minute. There were just too many of them and she was tiring. Suddenly she heard the sound of another sword, a squeal of pain, another clang, and the alley was empty of enemies.

Bridget leaned for a moment against the nearest wall, then slowly slid down it, her legs straight out before her, utterly exhausted. If a mosquito should happen by, she thought, I would not even have the energy to swat at it.

She drew a huge breath, noticing as she did so that a slender young man had sat beside her. Who this kind, brave rescuer was she did not know, but she put out a hand in gratitude. Her hand was warmly clasped, and a triumphant grin reflected her own.

"Bridget," she said, "from Norland."

"Arno, from here in Phylahm," said the youth, checking the notched edge of his sword with consternation. "Confound it, I'm usually more careful than this."

Bridget heaved a sigh and struggled to her feet. "Well," she said, "I owe you

Artwork by Alan Gutierrez

my life. I was on my way to the farrier, my horse has come up lame. If you will accompany me there, or meet me at The Creeping Ivy, I'll buy you food and drink as a tiny token of my gratitude."

"I'll walk with you," Arno said. "I'd be happy of a meal at The Creeping Ivy, though you owe me nothing."

Bridget said, "I only hope that my gold is secure, for the potboy at The Creeping Ivy directed me to this accursed alley."

"But their reputation is good," Arno said. "Let us take your horse to the farrier, and then have a meal at The Ivy. Perhaps afterward we might have a brief word with the potboy. If he directed you knowingly toward a ring of thieves he must answer for it."

At the inn they ordered a meal but did not talk to the potboy, who had fled when he saw them enter.

"He was temporary help, sir," the innkeeper said to Arno, who was apparently known and respected, "and so he's no loss. May I refill this pitcher for you? And would you like one of my wife's fruit trifles later?"

They accepted the refill for the pitcher of cider, declined the trifle, and sat back, relaxed and replete, conversing idly of this and that.

"I must go," Arno said later. "If you will be here in Phylahm tomorrow night, why don't you plan to attend the prince's banquet? I happen to have an extra invitation, if you'd like it."

Bridget thought of her crumpled gown, which she had dragged out of her pack and worn in attendance at nine different courts, searching for a prince for Alizina. She was heartily sick of the gown, but this would be an opportunity to examine yet another prince. Perhaps the gown could be worn one more time. She nodded. "I'd like it," she said.

Arno grinned, handed her an expensive-looking envelope, assured her that he too would be attending the banquet, and strode from the inn.

The next night, after persuading the innkeeper to sponge and press her gown, she used some of her dwindling resources to hire a carriage to take her to the royal residence. It was difficult, she had found, to ride astride Barnaby in a court gown and arrive looking anything but disheveled. And she didn't own a sidesaddle.

To her surprise, her invitation entitled her to sit in the middle of the hall, rather than at its foot. She looked about, admiring the court finery of the people around her, searching for Arno.

Suddenly there was a flourish of trumpets and into the ensuing silence a loud voice announced, "His Majesty, King Bruno; His Royal Highness, Prince Arno."

Well, Bridget thought, well, well, well. I wonder if he would be interested in an Orange Chrysanthemum? He isn't exactly handsome, but he's nice-looking, and tall, and I thought him intelligent. I know he has a sense of humor, and he is a splendid fighter as a bonus. He has a powerful father, so he'll make a strong ally. She peeked at the portrait, which was smiling broadly.

But what, she asked herself, was a prince doing in that alley?

Conversing with others at her table, she learned that Arno often went about, unaccompanied, to see how things were going in the kingdom.

"It is," the man on her right declared, "the despair of his father."

"Ah, but he is so well liked that he is never in real danger," the woman on her left replied.

"I've read about princes like that," Bridget said, thinking of the swordfight, and wondering if Prince Arno was, after all, quite so safe in his wanderings through the city.

What I have to do now, Bridget decided, is convince the prince that what he wants most in all the world is to marry Alizina. She thought about the tiny portrait which she had never showed to anyone. That may be the key, she thought. Especially since it's still smiling.

Three days later Prince Arno, on a magnificent black stallion named Storm, accompanied by Bridget on Barnaby, a troop of royal soldiers, and five wagonloads of gifts and supplies, set out from Phylahm for Bel'terra, to court the Princess Alizina.

Bridget had been overcome with honesty at the last minute, and admitted that the princess wasn't quite as lovely as represented in the miniature, but he insisted he had to see for himself.

"After all," said he, "a pretty face is not half as important as intelligence and character. And no harm done if I don't like her," he added. "I can always simply turn around and come home, and I'll have had a pleasant trip."

"But you see," he explained to Bridget a few days later, "I don't like her. I don't like her at all. So I'm going home."

"But why, Arno?" Bridget asked. They were sitting at a corner table in the common room of the city's finest inn, two nights after their arrival in Bel'terra.

"I don't know, really," he mused. "We just didn't get along. Everything I said made her angry, and everything she said made me furious. It was like trying to hitch a cat and an ox to the same wagon. We could never learn to get along."

"So what will you do?" Bridget inquired. She liked Arno, who was unpretentious and didn't insist on being addressed by his title. But she was unhappy at the thought of the twelve gold chain links she would not now receive, not to speak of the cost of sending him home.

Consider this a learning experience, Bridget, she told herself, *and write it off.*

"I don't like him," Princess Alizina told Bridget the next day. "I admit that he appears to be exactly what I asked you to find, but I cannot marry him, I simply cannot."

Bridget, sitting on a sofa in Alizina's luxurious parlor, was resigned. At least their feelings are mutual, she thought, the princess's and the prince's.

She handed the miniature, which was now frowning, to Alizina, who glanced at it, threw it across the room, and without warning burst into tears. Bridget noted with interest that, contrary to tales about princesses, this one's eyes turned red and her face blotchy when she wept.

"Oh, I don't know what to do," Her Highness sobbed. "I have fallen in love with someone else, and Father won't let me marry him, I know he won't. He's so wonderful, you can't imagine. And if I can't marry him, I won't have anyone. I won't, and I shall tell him so."

"Why would your father object, Your Highness?" Bridget asked politely, having disentangled the confusion of pronouns. She thought sadly of those twelve links of the chain. At least Prince Arno had said earlier that morning that he would pay his own expenses for his return to Parna.

"Because he's a commoner," Alizina wailed.

Bridget said in a soothing tone, "But perhaps your father won't object. At least you could ask him, could you not?

Artwork by Alan Gutierrez

You won't know for sure unless you ask."

Alizina dried her tears. "I could," she sniffled. "I will." She straightened her shoulders. "I will ask him right this very minute." She marched, head high, to the door. "You may stay here until I return," she said.

And don't weep, Bridget thought. You are not an appealing weeper. But your father very likely will approve, he is famous for indulging his Dear Little Princess.

"Oh pooh," the king said to his Dear Little Princess. "You're creating problems where none exist, my dear. We'll simply make him a Royal Duke, and then you can marry him. Provided he wants to marry you, of course. Who is this paragon with whom you are in love?"

"Oh, Father," Alizina said, her eyes shining, "it's Roland."

"Roland?"

"Roland Morningstar."

"What, my Chamberlain's son? Splendid! Bright boy, good head on his shoulders. We'll arrange the wedding as soon as may be. Perhaps this Prince What's-his-name will stay and be a guest. Come dear, let us start planning. Lots of details to work out."

"Bridget," the princess said when she returned to her sitting room, "guess what I have for you." She held her cupped hands out to Bridget.

"A live chick? A muffin? A dandelion?!"

"You mustn't be facetious," Alizina said severely, opening her hands to show the rest of the gold chain. "Of course, I do not really owe this to you," she said, "for you haven't *truly* fulfilled your quest. Call this a celebratory token of my esteem, in honor of the auspicious occasion of my wedding to my beloved."

"Thank you, Your Highness, and congratulations," Bridget said, bowing herself from the room.

As she walked toward the stables, she stopped for a moment to admire the twelve links, shining in the sun. What a beautiful celebratory token this is indeed, she thought. I wonder if Prince Arno would employ me to find a suitable princess. No, of course not, he's perfectly capable of finding his own bride. Probably has to fight them off, actually.

"Barnaby," she said, strolling into his stall, "here's a bit of apple for you. We're going home, Barnaby, just as soon as the truly auspicious occasion of Princess Alizina's wedding to her beloved, now a Royal Duke, is over." ❄

Jackie Shank is a retired elementary teacher who writes under the name Jackie, instead of Jacqueline, because that's what everyone but her mother and her students have always called her. The students called her Mrs. Shank, and her mother called her Honey Girl, neither of which seemed appropriate for a pseudonym. This is her second sale to *MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY MAGAZINE*.

Alan Gutierrez lives in Sedona, Arizona, with his wife and five-year-old daughter. He is a well-known cover artist, having recently appeared on such diverse publications as *Deep Space Nine* novelizations and the December 1995 issue of *Popular Mechanics*.

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The Last Word

Well, around the office we dubbed issue #29 as "the issue from h-e-double-toothpicks". This issue, luckily, went a little more smoothly — though we still had a few hairpulling afternoons (and evenings), like when one of the artists had to bow out of a commitment at the last minute and be replaced; like when not only did PageMaker refuse to read a Word file, but the entire computer locked up repeatedly (and when we finally got PageMaker to read the file, somehow it had lost every single em-dash, quote mark, apostrophe, and ellipsis). They say editors have the shortest lifespan of any professional group; I'm learning why. (Luckily, Marion's responsibilities here seem to suit her, so she's likely to outlive us all. But she's been wise enough to say pretty well away from computers, and layout's never her job. Most of the time, my job suits me, too, as so far I have no need of either a cardiologist nor an ulcer specialist.)

She and I have lined up some really excellent stories for future issues, so stay tuned — more great fiction is heading toward your mailbox! We have stories from Jo Clayton and Robin Bailey and Dorothy Heydt; Carol Leever, Julia Mandala, and Syne Mitchell; Raul Reyes, John P. Buentello, and Kathleen Massie-Ferch. Three authors with stories in this issue, Huan-Hua Chye, Steven Piziks, and Jackie Shank, have more stories in the "future" file. We have a lovely tale of "Scandal" from eluki bes shahar, and Karen Anderson has promised to write another story featuring the lead character in "The Theban Fix".

If you keep sending in stories and we keep rejecting them — maybe the "wish" that Jackie Shank had in a recent story (which we also rejected) might not seem so bad to you: Jackie's character got three wishes from a genie, and one was to have every story accepted. But think about it — what kind of fool you might look like if your every half-baked idea were accepted with glad editorial cries. Of course, you'd be crying all the way to the bank — at first — as Jackie's character did. But sooner or later you'd develop a reputation for mediocrity, and none of us wants to live with that.

I wish each of you a good year in 1996!

— *Rachel E. Holmen*

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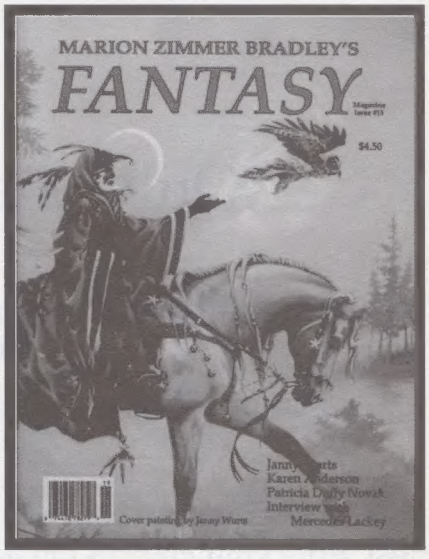

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The Cauldron — Issue #29

Story	Artist
❑ **A Prince Among Frogs** by Elisabeth Waters	❑ Jonathan Hunt
❑ **Why I'm Traveling With a Talking Cow** by Michael H. Payne	❑ Julia Lacquement
❑ **Sparrow's Song** by Huan-Hua Chye	❑ Dale Enzenbacher
❑ **Oops** by Lorie Calkins	❑ Barb Armata
❑ **Fatherhood** by Steven Piziks	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **Dragon Slayer** by Carey Daniels and Stephanie Randolph	❑ Donald W. Rissler
❑ **La Donna Triste** by Patricia Russo	❑ Armand Cabrera
❑ **The Counterfeit Maiden** by Richard Purtill	❑ Dameon Willich
❑ **A Suitable Suitor** by Jackie Shank	❑ Alan Gutierrez

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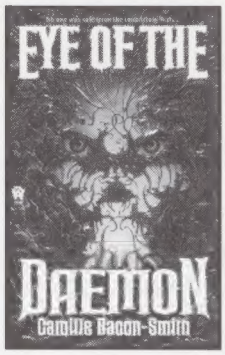

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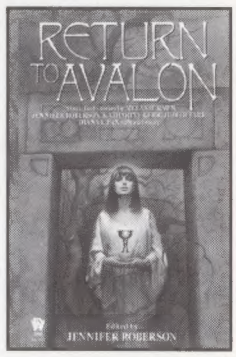

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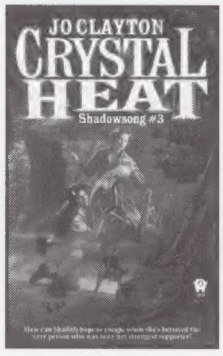

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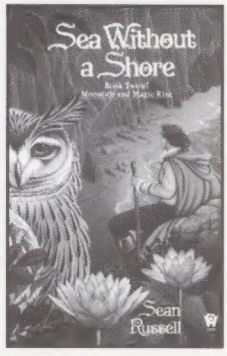

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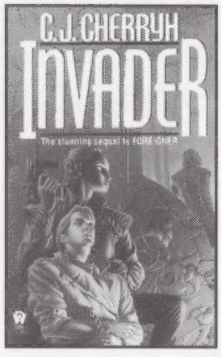

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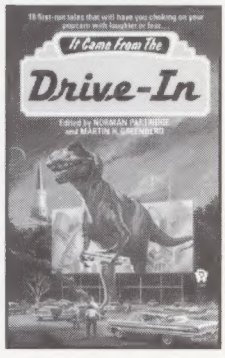

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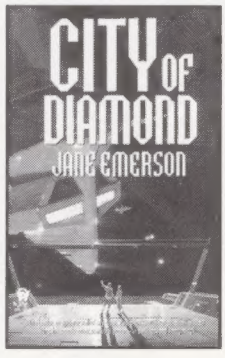

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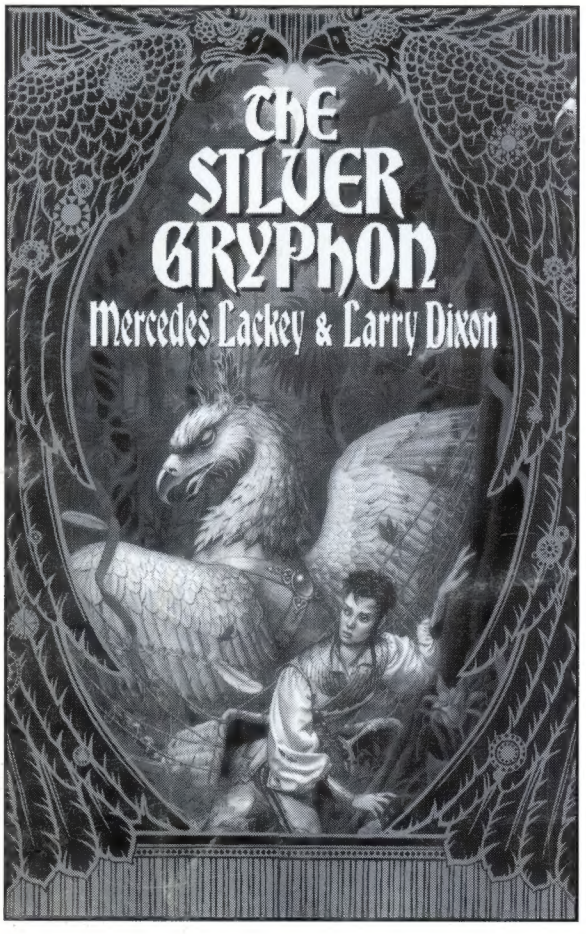

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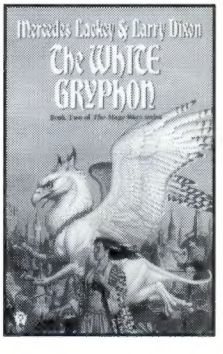

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